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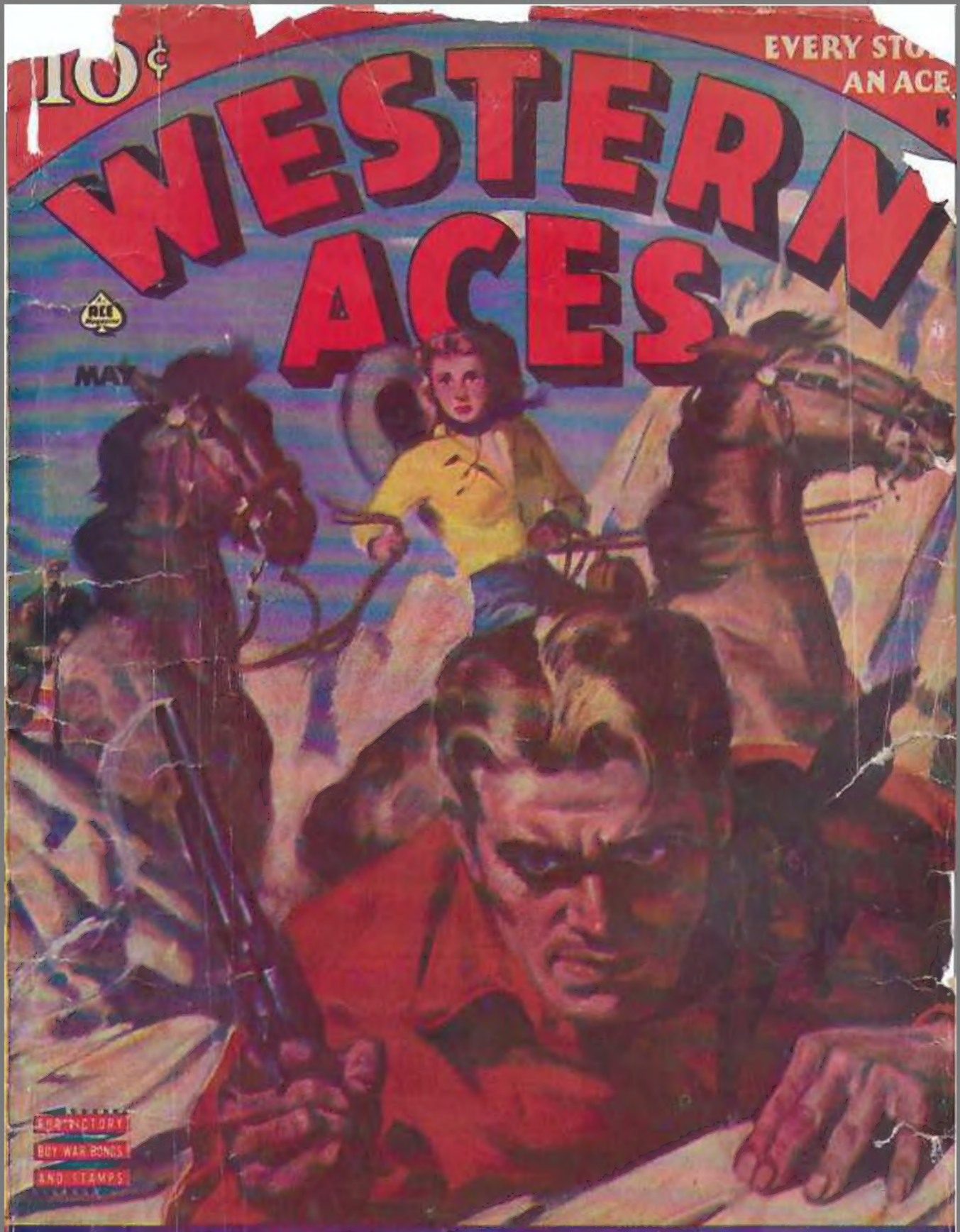

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by J. EDWARD LEITHEAD

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WESTERN ACES

May 1945 — Vol. 21 No. 4

CURSE OF THE CALABOOSE BRAND
(Novelette)..J. Edward Leithead 9
Quint Iredell rides back to Cache Creek to find both his sons marked with the hoosegow iron.

★

BLIZZARD TRACK MOCKERY
Gunnison Steele 17
His lobo laughter turns into horror when he hears the voice of the man he killed.

★

THE CHISEL'EM TRAIL
Joe Archibald 23
Drones from away back, these two work-hatin' hombres fall into a hornets' nest of tin-star stingers.

★

MYSTERY OF THE HIDDEN HOARD
Nat W. McKelvey 30
The true tale of a fabulous pay-dirt cache.

★

FIREBEARD RIDES TO BRIMSTONE
Stuart Friedman 33
Even this famed gunhawk cannot cope with the .45 facts in a vicious sidewinder setup.

★

LIGHTNING AVENGER
Roger Rhodes 40
He doesn't savvy that the death snare will trap a cunning coyote.

★

MASKED HOOFS.....Barry Gardner 43
A redheaded button teaches the sheriff something about honest horseflesh.

★

TRIGGER STONE, M.D.
Wilson L. Covert 47
Young Doc Stone has to swap his medicine kit for a bullet-studded gunbelt.

★

SHACKLED TO THE HANGTREE
Robert S. Fenton 54
Because of a man's past performance, Deputy Albershot plays a leading role at death's curtain call.

★

Cover by Ernest Chiriacka

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Curse of the

Action-Packed Novelette

By J. Edward Leithead

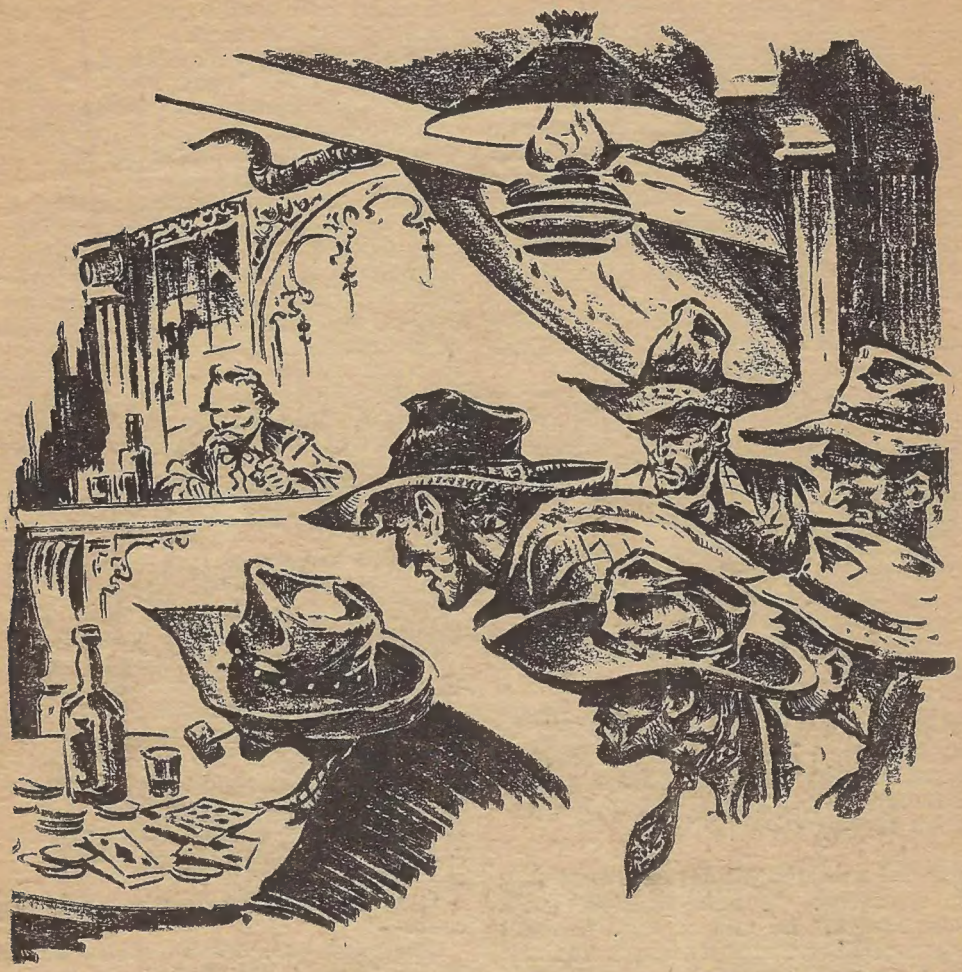
CHAPTER I

SADDLING his horse at the Stirrup R corral, Quint Iredell heard the thud of hard-booted feet on the path to the ranch house. There was just one man in the outfit who set his heels down in that uncompromising way, so indicative of his dealings with others on the Cache Creek range. Polk Ralston had come up from nothing, he said, chiefly because he had never let regard for the rights of his fellows influence him in getting what he wanted.

Still a young man, he owned ten thousand cattle on the hoof. Or he had owned that many until a hard winter, followed by a summer of unparalleled drought, and small scale rustling, had whittled them down.

Iredell faced about as his boss came toward the corral. A trifle younger than Ralston, Quint had ramrodded the big spread for three years. Both were six-foot specimens of hardy manhood, but there similarity ended. Quint had level gray eyes, lips that could be firm but smiled easily. Quite unlike Polk's steel-trap mouth and gimlet eyes, of a tawny hue to match his swarthiness. Iredell often sharply disagreed with Ralston, a thing the latter wouldn't have tolerated

Calaboose Brand



After seven long years in the pen on a false rustling charge, Quint Iredell came back to Cache Creek to find his sons. But Quint found that the hoosegow brand burnt deep. For one boy was a gambler, the other a gunman—and their boss was the hombre who had put Quint behind the bars.

but for the fact that Quint was the most reliable, experienced cow boss on Cache Creek.

Iredell, resting a hand on his saddle, didn't like Ralston's expression as he strode up. It was the hard look he always wore when he had determined to ride roughshod over somebody.

"Quint," he said, "I've taken all the losses in cattle I'm goin' to. Come fall, we won't have above a thousand beef steers, to sell, less than half what we

usually ship. I've figured a way to recoup, and I'll strongly urge Haverstraw, McLean, Pelham and Findlay to do the same. You know them rustlers on the outskirts—"

"Small ranchers is a better name, Polk." Iredell's eyes narrowed slightly. "One or two may rustle a bit, but that don't condemn the lot of 'em."

"You've always argued that," Ralston said in a tone of annoyance, "but there's plenty of stock gone that never was killed off by bad weather. Anyway, I want you and the boys to pack runnin'-irons from now on. I'll have the blacksmith at Maricopa make them. Every critter of them small outfits you cut sign of, run the Stirrup onto 'em."

Quint's hand slid from his saddle, blocked into a fist at his side. "That's just plain stealin', Polk!"

"Is it?" retorted Ralston sharply. "Not if the cattle happen to have been lifted from me or any of the other big outfits in the first place. Don't be a fool, Quint. We'll have no trouble with Sheriff Crossett. Remember, you've got a family—"

"I'm thinking of them right now," stated Iredell. "Let alone my own feelin's in the matter, what would my wife say if I turned brand burner?"

"Who's the boss in your family?" Ralston sneered.

"It's a partnership," replied Quint. "Polk, I've never used a runnin'-iron in my life, never intend to. If you want to recover stolen stock, go to the sheriff. But count me out when it comes to bossin' a job of brand blottin'."

POLK surveyed his foreman's set face in silence. "I half expected you'd balk, Iredell," he said at last. "I won't argue right or wrong with you. You're a good cowman, but when you refuse to take orders we're through. I'll give you your time."

Quint nodded gravely. "That'll suit me. I had a notion we'd come to a partin' of the ways some day, Ralston. I'll tell my wife."

He looped the bridle rein over an arm and led his horse toward the cabin, a hundred yards from the bunkhouse, where he lived with his family. Polk watched him through slitted eyes. No man crossed Polk without suffering for it. He turned away abruptly.

Two boys tumbled through the cabin doorway, greeting Quint with affectionate whoops. Grover was fourteen and looked like his dad. Phil, twelve, more resembled the dark-eyed mother who appeared on the threshold.

"Forget something?" asked Mary Iredell.

Walking toward the cabin with an arm about each boy, Quint shook his head, tried to smile. When she had learned the worst, his wife took it gamely, commending Quint for his stand.

"You can get work with one of the other big outfits," said Mary. "I don't believe Clem Haverstraw, for one, would stoop to brand blotting. Ralston's always boasted of being a self-made man. He didn't do a very good job of it."

A few days later Quint bundled his family and household goods into a wagon, and, forking his horse, bid good-by to the Stirrup R. His first stop was Haverstraw's ranch. Clem and his wife were cordial, but Iredell saw refusal forming on the cattleman's lips before he uttered it, when his visitor asked for a riding job. Haverstraw gave no reason except that he hadn't a spot for Quint. After he had tried out McLean, Pelham and Findlay with the same result, Iredell knew what was the matter. He had been blacklisted—for the reason that he refused to turn rustler!

"Never mind," Mary comforted him. "There's still the little ranchers. If you can't get work with one of them, Cache Creek isn't the only cattle range."

With Mary teamstering, Quint jogging along on his roan, they came one day upon a cottonwood that bore ghastly fruit. At sight of the figures swaying from a limb, Mary thrust the eagerly peering boys down in the wagon bed. Quint rode up to the wind-stirred victims of lynch law, scanned a printed placard on the shirt of one: *Cow Thieves Beware!* He called to his wife:

"Seems like Judge Lynch has opened court—"

The brush behind him crackled and he hipped in the saddle, right hand flashing down. A rider emerged from the thicket, a long-necked, gaunt man with rust-colored hair and beard, topped by a battered Stetson. He gave Quint grim salutation:

"Howdy, Iredell? Viewin' the remains?"

Quint let go of his gun hilt. He knew Jed Winslow as boss of the Lazy W, one of the smaller brands on Cache Creek.

"Your men?" Iredell asked.

Winslow tipped his hat to Mary, then faced Quint, his eyes burning.

"Yes, my men. I hear tell you was fired off the Stirrup because you wouldn't pick on us little fellers, Iredell. We was drivin' seventy head of steers to Maricopa when a passel of Ralston's cowhands jumped us. I got away, but them two was caught, strangled without benefit of judge and

jury. And the beef bunch taken. What do you think of that?"

Quint said, "I'm not surprised. If I was you, Winslow—no, I wouldn't either."

"Goin' to say I ought to take it up with the sheriff, eh?" Winslow said. "Waste of time, Iredell. Sheriff Crossett will stick up for the big interests every time. I'm goin' to get the cattle back, though. Say—" Jed's eyes flicked at the wagon—"you movin' out of the country?"

"If I can't find work," nodded Quint. "The big fellows, influenced by Ralston, have me down on their blacklist."

"That's a blamed shame," declared Winslow. "I'm shy two good men. I'll hire you myself at tophand wages. If your wife'll cook for the outfit that'll be extra. Plenty of room at my ranch to quarter your family."

"It's certainly kind of you, Winslow." Quint's gaze shifted to Mary. She had a look in her eyes which caused him to add, "I'll talk it over with my wife."

QUINT kicked his horse toward the wagon.

"Somehow," said Mary in a low tone, "I don't trust that man. You know rustlers have been nibbling at the big herds. How can you be sure Winslow isn't one of them?"

"Hardly believe he'd make the offer if he was," Quint replied. "He knows where I stand in regard to cow thieves."

"Do as you think best," said Mary, "but I'm keeping my fingers crossed."

Quint would have preferred his wife's complete agreement in the matter, but thought he could take a chance. Winslow told Quint to head for the Lazy W and make himself at home. Jed had a bit of scouting to do over at the Stirrup R. Before leaving the vicinity of the hang-tree, Iredell helped his new boss cut down the two bodies and bury them in a shallow trench.

Three steely-eyed cowhands gave the Iredell family welcome at Winslow's home ranch. It was morning when Jed returned. He had found his steers corralled in a branding pen on Ralston's range. Mary Iredell had prepared breakfast and they all sat down together.

"Tonight," said Jed, conveying half of a fried egg to his mouth on a knife blade, "I'm aimin' to pay that brandin' corral a visit. Want you along, Quint."

Iredell nodded. He was quite willing to help Winslow recover the stock, believing that Polk Ralston was taking a high hand to recoup his losses. But Quint hoped there wouldn't be gunplay with the men who had ridden under him so long. When they were alone, Mary told Quint she wished he didn't have to go. Suppose those cattle had been rustled from the Stirrup R, she said. He'd stand accused of doing the very thing he had quit Ralston's employ to avoid.

His wife's anxiety impressed Quint, for her fears were not easily aroused. The old branding corral, one of several used at roundup time, was a couple of miles from the headquarters ranch. When Winslow's party circled it under cover of night, no guns blazed to warn them off. Apparently Ralston felt there was no need of placing a guard over the stock.

They closed in on the big pen, but before the gate was opened Quint lighted matches, shielded by his hat, to scan the hips of cattle nearest the fence. Jed and the others growled at his action, signifying distrust. The brands that met Quint's eye were Lazy W. He realized they could have been worked, but if so it was a skillful job.

"No sense gettin' mad, Jed," he said, stepping back in the saddle. "I just wanted to be sure."

They drove the cattle out and west across the range where for three years Quint had been cow boss. Mary was waiting up at the Lazy W for their return. She was relieved they hadn't run into trouble, but still doubtful of the future.

At noon next day the outfit rode into the yard in response to Mary's vigorous strokes on the iron triangle hung outside the kitchen door. They had just turned the horses into the corral when a cavalcade rounded the shoulder of a hill, three hundred yards east of the main building. Jed Winslow flung his saddle on the ground and slapped leather.

"Here they come with blood in their eyes!" he yelled.

The coming of the Stirrup outfit was not unexpected. Quint quickly hung his saddle on the fence-top, looking the pounding riders over for the glint of a law badge. Sheriff Crossett wasn't with them. His absence seemed proof of Ralston's lawless purpose, dispelled any doubt in Quint's mind of the ownership of those steers.

"They can't get away with this, Jed," said Iredell, stepping to Winslow's side. "There's still a little law on Cache Creek. Don't shoot unless they do."

Quint was the only one of the Lazy W men who hadn't pulled a gun. He watched the grim faces of the horsebackers thundering into the yard, men who had worked beside him on the range. He hated to trade lead with them. Blued steel leaped from holsters as they came on. Ralston was leaning above his horse's flattened

ears, a look of surprise on his face as he discovered his ex-foreman.

"Throwed in with cow thieves, have you, Iredell?" he shouted. "Bluffin' you were such a square shooter! Maybe you've been workin' with them all along. Where's the cattle you stole out of my brandin' pen last night?"

CHAPTER II

JED WINSLOW'S gun barked before Quint could answer Ralston. A bronc nose-dived, piling its rider. Jed spun on his heel, yelling:

"Make for the barn! We can't fight 'em in the open!"

Ralston and his men lashed back with flaming lead. Quint wheeled to follow Jed and the others in a race for the barn, slinging out his Colt. Though Winslow had fired first, Iredell didn't blame him, for a fight was inevitable. The Stirrup R men were wrenching to a stop, hitting the dirt to take surer aim. A Lazy W hand stumbled and fell on his face. Quint, springing past him, saw the red stain in the back of his shirt.

The barn doors swung to behind Winslow, Iredell and two punchers, one limping with a slug in his leg. Jed ordered the pair to the loft, to rake the attackers from the upper window. He and Quint stayed on the ground floor, firing through the crack between the double doors. Winslow cursed when he missed, which was pretty often, because the lead hailing against the barn front came through. It kept him and Quint ducking. Iredell hadn't downed a man yet. He was shooting to disable rather than kill his former saddlemates.

"There's so many of 'em out there," snarled Jed, whipping the bandanna from his neck to bind a slashed forearm, "I don't figure our chances any too good."

As Iredell concurred, a scream sounded above them. A voice spoke from the hayloft, "That was Cale! He leaned too far out and they got him!" Cale's body crashed on the ground in front of the barn. He cried out for help. Quint pushed open one of the doors to drag him inside. But a bullet smashed into the helpless man's brain before Iredell could lay a hand on him. An angry oath froze on Quint's lips at a sudden shout from Polk Ralston, crouched behind a wagon.

"Stop them kids!"

Iredell's startled glance fell on two small figures racing toward the barn. Grover was carrying a six-shooter; Phil clutched the .22 rifle his father had given him on his last birthday. Mary rushed from the house, to stop and stare, one hand shading her eyes. Quint could discern her agonized expression. The boys evidently had eluded her to join their father in his fight against odds. Their flying feet raised dust along the lane where Stirrup R men lay, covering the barn.

Fear laid chill fingers on Quint's heart. The youngsters had been favorites with most of the Stirrup cowhands, but he couldn't be sure they would refuse to shoot down a couple of kids. It would be safer for Ralston's outfit if no eyewitnesses were left to tell what happened.

Quint roared, "Grover! Phil! Turn back!

"We're going to help you, pop!" Grover's shrill voice sounded above the thud of his and Phil's small boots. They were still fifty feet from the barn. A Colt thundered and Phil spun round with a loud cry. As he fell, Grover threw himself flat on the ground not far from his brother, raising the heavy gun in both hands. He fired at the wagon whence had come the shot that knocked Phil down. At the moment Ralston wasn't exposing himself, for Quint's bullets were chipping the side of the wagon box.

"You murderin' skunk!" yelled Quint, and leaped from the barn in a mad sprint toward his imperiled sons.

"Kill Quint! Kill him!" he heard Ralston bawling, and slugs kicked up gouts of dust around the racing figure.

Iredell felt the bite of lead, but they would have to pulp his heart to stop him. He was conscious of Mary's screams, but didn't take his eyes from the boys sprawled on the ground. He saw Phil move, try to sit up. The boy was crying. Grover crawled to his side. A bullet hurled Quint off his feet as he reached them. He rose again on his knees, gasping:

"Phil! Where you hit, son?"

Grover turned a scared face. "It's his shoulder, pop."

A slug whipped through the crown of Quint's hat, cutting his scalp. He said huskily, "Keep down, boys, don't move!"

RIBBED up to kill, Quint turned to answer the singing lead. Faces peered at him from various points of vantage, faces that once had been friendly but now were hostile. His gun flamed and a grizzled cowhand pitched sideways from behind the curbstone of the well. Quint shifted aim to another target, a cowboy edging around the corral wall to flank him. At the crack of his .45 the puncher buckled forward.

A shot from behind laid Quint low. He was but dimly conscious of events for some time. The sounds of battle died away. Grover's and Phil's frantic voices

reached him as from a great distance. Something struck him hard in the face, a man's hand, and he was pulled to his feet. He looked into the rage-twisted face of Polk Ralston.

"You and your rustler friends put the bullet brand on a lot of us today, Iredell! But we've wiped out all but you and Winslow. You'll both swing pronto!"

Quint noticed Jed a few feet away, with his arms bound. They were surrounded by Stirrup men. As Ralston pronounced sentence, Mary Iredell's voice broke out in frenzied protest. She tried to force her way to her husband's side, but ungentle hands caught and held her back. A clatter of hoofs sounded nearby. Quint raised desperate eyes as three riders reined up, towering in saddles over the heads of his captors.

"Why didn't you wait for me, Ralston?" demanded Sheriff Crossett. "I got word you wanted to show me some misbranded cattle. At your ranch we learned you'd set out for the Lazy W."

"I'll tell you why," retorted Ralston. "I had no cattle to show you. Winslow's outfit stole 'em again last night. And look who we caught with the gang—my ex-cow boss!"

Crossett's eyebrows climbed as he glanced at Iredell. He said, "I suppose you're gettin' ready to hang 'em? Well, that's out, Ralston. I'm the law around here. First, let's get it settled about the cattle, if you know where they are."

Ralston turned to Jed Winslow. "Tell him, you! We ain't had time to look."

"'Bout a half mile out on the range," Jed answered sullenly.

"One of my deputies will take charge of the prisoners while we're lookin' at the stock, Ralston," stated the sheriff. "Get your horses. Howdy, Mrs. Iredell," he added, twitching his hatbrim as Mary came up leading Phil, his left shoulder blood-soaked. "This is bad business. What's wrong with the boy?"

She told him. Crossett frowned, shot an angry look at Ralston. "Pretty raw, I'd say. A lot of harm them two kids could've done you, Polk."

Quint Iredell had never thought much of Crossett until that day. Evidently the sheriff was going to see justice done. It worried Quint, though, to learn Ralston's reason for keeping those steers penned up. Unless certain they were rustled stuff he wouldn't have arranged for Crossett to look at the evidence. Quint looked at Jed as the deputy sheriff led them to the ranch house, but Jed avoided his gaze.

Crossett, Ralston and some of the cowboys rode off, were gone for an hour or more. When they returned, Quint's last hope faded at sight of the sheriff's grim face, Ralston's look of triumph. Iredell and Winslow, handcuffed, were seated on the porch under the deputy's eye.

"Looks like we got the goods on you, Winslow," said Crossett, mounting the porch steps. "Every one of them steers was a Stirrup R before you worked the brands over."

Jed nodded. "Guess there's nothin' for me to say."

Quint half rose from his chair, steel-linked hands raised to strike. "You lied to me, Winslow—"

The sheriff pushed him back in the chair. "That'll do, Iredell! You're too good a cowman not to know an altered brand."

Quint and Jed were tried in the Maricopa courthouse. The jury wasn't much impressed by Iredell's plea that he had been duped by Winslow. The reason he gave for believing Ralston's men had rustled the steers, setting in motion Polk's plan for plundering the small ranchers, didn't help Quint's case. Chiefly because the jurymen were all employees of the big outfits. At any rate, Quint better understood why his former friends at the Stirrup hadn't hesitated to ring him with blazing guns. He had, though innocently enough, taken part in a night raid with cow thieves.

WHEN the judge sentenced Quint and Jed to ten years in the State pen, Quint's somber eyes sought Mary, who sat in the front row of witnesses, Grover and Phil at either side. The sheriff permitted Quint to speak to his wife before taking him back to his cell. Jed, handcuffed to a deputy sheriff, was in earshot.

"If I'd paid more heed to you, honey," Quint said, "I wouldn't be in this fix. What's to become of you and the boys?"

Mary answered bravely, "Don't worry, Quint. You're really innocent of wrongdoing. I'll get work. We'll be here, waiting for you."

Quint said, "Ten years is a long time. . . . Grover and Phil, be good and help your mother all you can."

Grover's brown face was screwed up with the effort not to bawl. "I'm fourteen, pop. Big enough to look after ma and Phil."

Phil started wailing. His mother turned to comfort him, though her own tears were flowing freely.

When Quint and Jed were returned to the cell they occupied in the local calaboose, Iredell faced the rustler with blazing eyes.

"Ten years, you double-tongued crook! I ought to kill you with my bare hands!"

Jed Winslow nodded slowly. "Maybe

you ought. I didn't realize what I was lettin' you in for, how tough it'd be on your family. I never was married, so how would I know? I was one of twelve kids, kicked out early to hustle for myself. I took the wrong turn."

They were transferred to the State prison, and there Quint received a letter from Mary, saying she had secured a job clerking in Sam Enders' merchandise stor . Phil ran errands for Sam, Grover was helping the blacksmith. Cheering letters came regularly. Then, one day, Mary brought the boys to visit their father.

A year dragged drearily by for Quint. On a gray winter's morning a letter was handed him addressed in an unfamiliar scrawl, but with the Maricopa postmark. Quint sat on his cot to read it. Suddenly the hand holding the letter dropped to his knee.

Jed, leaning against the wall, asked, "Bad news?"

"The worst, Jed. Mary died of pneumonia last week. The day after the funeral, Grover and Phil ran away with a freightin' outfit passin' through the town."

At one time it would have infuriated Quint to see before him the man responsible for much of his trouble. But that time was past. Jed had his white spots, had convinced his cell-mate he was truly remorseful. Besides, Quint felt himself partly to blame, for he had had Mary's warning.

Jed watched Quint's head go down and stepped over to lay a hand on his shoulder. "It's mighty hard losin' your wife, but you still have them boys."

Quint looked at him gloomily. "If they're alive when I get out, and I can find them."

He wrote Sam Enders, asking the storekeeper to let him know if Grover and Phil turned up again. Sam never replied. Yet, when Quint left the prison at the end of seven years, his term and Jed's shortened for good behavior, his steps turned back to Maricopa, the only place where he might be able to get trace of his sons. Grover and Phil would be twenty-one and nineteen respectively. Jed went with him. He now had no other interest in life but to help the man he had wronged.

THEY arrived in Maricopa afoot, two men who had been more accustomed to riding than walking. Quint's black hair had a white blaze through it, Jed's hair and beard were sprinkled with gray. The sun had burned away some of their prison pallor. They had no guns, and just a few dollars between them. The old cowtown looked different, most of the familiar names had disappeared from store and saloon fronts.

"There's Sam Enders' sign, Jed!" Quint pointed suddenly. "Glad he ain't dead or moved out. He must be gettin' along in years."

Sam was behind the counter, a lot grayer and more wrinkled, when they entered the otherwise empty store. He took a long look through his spectacles, then swooped upon Quint, grabbing his hand.

"You don't look a day older, Quint!" he exclaimed.

"No?" Iredell shoved back his hat. "See that white streak?"

"Makes you better lookin' if anything," declared Sam. "And this is Jed?"

"Yeh," grinned Winslow. "I s'pose a lot has happened since we last saw the town?"

"More'n you'd ever guess," said the storekeeper. "For one thing, the unfenced range is gone. Sodbusters are more numerous than cowpunchers on Cache Creek. The big outfits had to pull in their lines and fence up. All but Polk Ralston." Sam observed Iredell's grimace. "Don't remember him kindly, eh?"

Quint said, "Poison to me, Sam."

Jed added vigorously, "That goes double!"

Sam unconsciously lowered his voice. "Just between us, I've always felt the same about him. Ralston has changed with the times, but become a greater rascal than ever. Sold his cattle, divided his range into quarter sections. Purchasers make a down payment, and Ralston takes a short term note for the balance. No homesteader I know of has been able to meet his note when due. As a result, Polk gets the land back to sell to the next hopeful sodbuster."

"Workin' so the law can't touch him," said Iredell. "What about Clem Haverstraw and the other cowmen?"

"Stickin' to the cattle trade," said Enders, "but losin' critters right along, I hear. It's blamed on homesteaders that don't care whose beef they eat, but I happen to know Ralston tried to buy out his neighbors and they refused. Maybe his gun-riders are stealin' 'em blind so they'll have to sell, givin' Polk more land to turn into homesteads. He's gone heavy into real estate, even in town. Opened a land office. Owns the Easy Win, biggest gamblin' house here."

"Enough about Ralston," said Iredell. "What I really want to know is if Grover and Phil ever were heard from after they ran away with the freighters?"

The storekeeper gave him a peculiar look. "They turned up suddenly, several

months back. Young men now. I'd have dropped you a line, but didn't think you'd be pleased to hear what they're doin'. Grover deals faro bank at the Easy Win. Phil rides with Ralston's gunmen. I was sure you'd take it hard, Quint." Enders gazed sympathetically at the stunned man. "It's close to sundown, and I reckon you'll find Grover on duty at the gamblin' house. I don't think Phil's in town."

"Thanks, Sam. I'll look up Grover. A gambler and a gunman, and they work for Ralston! Their mother wouldn't have liked it any better than I do." Quint started out with Winslow, then turned abruptly. "Where was Mary buried, Sam?"

"In the town cemetery, Quint," replied the storekeeper gently. "I'll show you the place, any time you're ready."

CHAPTER III

IREDELL and Winslow heard angry voices as they walked into the ornate gambling house, lighted by swinging lamps. It was too early for the night crowd, but a dozen range-garbed men were gathered at the faro layout. The dealer, clad in the conventional black of the gambling fraternity, was arguing with two red-faced cowboys. Quint knew Grover instantly. He looked much as his father had at the same age. One puncher's voice rose piercingly.

"I say you slipped two outa the box that time, Iredell! I know the trick. The cards are trimmed and sanded—"

Grover Iredell jerked to his feet, his face white and tense in the lamplight. "We don't run brace games here!"

The cowboy leaned to snatch the cards beside the box. Grover struck his arm away. With a curse, the puncher straightened, snapping hand to gun butt, Grover reached under his coat. A man on the same side of the table swung his fist against the dealer's head, the lookout on his stool behind Grover crying a warning too late. Hurled half across the layout, the derringer he had drawn sent spinning, Grover was seized by his accuser and another, dragged off the table. One smashed him with a gun barrel. As he sprawled on the floor they jumped on him.

Quint Iredell leaped forward. Jed was right behind him, wishing they had guns. Quint hit the group of players like a charging steer, knocking two off their feet. He slugged another who grabbed for iron, and the man went down, dropping his gun. The two cowboys kicking Grover danced sideways, one throwing a shot that missed Quint by scant margin. He lunged in, his fist crunching on the fellow's jaw, driving him back against the table. Quint seized the unconscious Grover, pulled him half upright, swung the limp figure across his shoulder.

Jed knocked down a cowhand who shoved out a leg to trip Quint. Two others tried to close with the ex-rustler as Iredell started for the door with his burden. Winslow punched his way clear of opponents and clattered after Quint. But the irate players still on their feet pursued the rescuers. Quint and Jed got through the doorway, turned upstreet. The cowboys were only a few yards behind, not shooting since they had discovered the pair were gunless, but determined to maul them and give Grover his needings.

"They're tailin' us hard, Quint!" cried Jed, running beside Iredell and jerking a sleeve across bleeding mouth. "Where'll we head in?"

"Dunno," panted Quint, "but I'll not let 'em kill this boy of mine!"

They came even with a brightly lighted restaurant. A tall, black-haired young woman had stepped outside to see what the trouble was. She caught Quint's words and called sharply:

"Come in here! I don't believe they'll follow."

She held the door wide. Iredell turned gratefully through the opening, Winslow following. The young woman closed and locked the door. She said to Quint, "This way," and led him between crowded tables to a small room next to the kitchen. Quint eased Grover down on a couch. Just then the cowboys pounded on the street door. Then there was the crash of breaking glass.

"Lady," said Quint, "I'm afraid you've let yourself in for somethin'. If you have a couple of guns, my pardner and me will try to keep 'em from wreckin' the place."

The sound of breaking door-glass had startled her. "If we had a sheriff worth his salt, he'd be here by now. I don't keep a gun. I'm Angela Blaine, proprietress of this eating house. You're—"

"Quint Iredell."

Angela looked at him closely. "You said, 'this boy of mine,' meaning Grover. I see a resemblance. His father?"

Quint nodded, whirled at the smashing of another pane of glass, probably a window. "Jed, you and me better get out there, guns or no guns!"

He strode back into the restaurant. Excited patrons were retreating from the front, out of range of flying glass. Angela Blaine swiftly followed Iredell and Winslow. Quint called out to the panicky diners that he'd be pleased if someone

would produce a six-shooter, two, in fact. An old man crawled from under a table, shoved a Colt at him, but first.

"You brung the trouble with you, feller, now get rid of it!"

SOMEONE else tossed Winslow a six-shooter. Their boots crunched on glass fragments as they neared the front of the restaurant. Unable to force the door, the riotous punchers had shattered a window, and two of them, hats over fists, were enlarging the jagged hole with furious jabs. But Quint and Jed never had a chance to use the borrowed hardware. Horsemen suddenly pounded up on the sidewalk, yelling, shooting over the heads of the cowboys. They were driven pell-mell down the street.

Angela Blaine brushed by Quint and Jed, key in hand. "That was Rowdy Driggs' bunch," she said to Quint. "As a rule I haven't much use for Rowdy—he's chief pistoleer for Polk Ralston—but this is one time he did a real service."

She unlocked the door.

"I'm sure sorry they busted—" Quint began.

"Don't worry about the damage," Angela told him. "I rent the place from Ralston. Those rioters were from his gambling house and he'll make the necessary repairs."

Hoofs clattered on the sidewalk planks and two returning horsemen pulled up by the door. An unshaven, thickset rider, with steel-chip eyes, spoke to Angela.

"Why was that gang breakin' into your place, Miss Blaine?"

"This man can explain, Driggs, better than I." Angela indicated Quint. "He's Grover Iredell's father."

Rowdy Driggs looked at the tall man beside Angela, then at his saddlemate, a youthful rider with a reckless face. "That makes him your pap, too, Phil."

Father and son already had locked glances. Except for dark eyes, like his mother's, there was nothing to remind Quint of the little boy of seven years ago. Phil slid from the saddle, came forward with his hand out, his lips quirked up at the corners.

"It's a long time, pop," he said, "but I'd have known you anywhere."

Quint, gripping his hand, didn't speak for a minute. "A long time, son. Grover's inside. He had some trouble at the Easy Win. I want to talk to you both."

"See you later, Rowdy," Phil called to the gunman, who nodded and swung his horse around.

Grover was sitting up when Phil and his father, trailed by Winslow, reached the back room. Angela Blaine stayed in the restaurant to quiet her patrons. Grover's eyes flicked over the three, dull with pain, and came to rest on his brother.

"Where's the fellows that ganged up on me? How'd I get here?"

"Pop brought you, I reckon," grinned Phil.

"Pop!" Grover's eyes shifted, widened. He got to his feet with difficulty. "Why, doggone, so it is!"

There could be no doubt they were glad to see him. Quint's happiness was tinged with regret to find them in their present occupations. Still, he couldn't judge them too harshly, considering they had been left to shift for themselves when so young.

"Like your jobs, boys?" he said quietly. "You haven't forgotten what Polk Ralston did to us, years ago?"

"Sent you to jail, you mean?" Grover was looking over his father's shoulder at Winslow. "I know you weren't really guilty of rustlin', but wasn't this Winslow hombre to blame for gettin' you into that mess?"

"Even so," replied Quint, "Jed is worth a dozen of Ralston's kind. Grover, were you workin' a sandtell at the Easy Win, like that cowboy said?"

Grover flushed. "I don't want to answer that, pop. Phil and me have to make a livin'. Ralston pays good."

"You've answered me," said Quint gravely, and glanced at his younger son. "Phil, I hope there're no notches on your gun?"

Phil unleathered his Colt, to show the walnut stock barren of nicks.

A THUDDING step, that Quint remembered well, approached the door. Polk Ralston entered the room. He looked older, harder. His eyes were bleak as he addressed Quint:

"Driggs told me you were back. You can see I don't hold a grudge, hirin' both your boys. What work you aim to do, Quint?"

"Haven't given it much thought, Ralston."

Polk had noticed Winslow lowering at him. "Well, what about workin' for me? You and Winslow."

Quint knew Polk wasn't being kind. He was uneasy over the return of these men, who had cause to hate him. Polk wanted the pair where he could keep an eye on them. And that suited Quint. He had a score to settle.

"Now wait, Jed," he interrupted Winslow's angry refusal. "We're not likely to have many jobs thrown at us. Let's take him up."

Jed gasped in surprise, then nodded. Quint had something up his sleeve.

Ralston smiled grimly. "It'll be easy work. Got horses? Guns? I'll supply you with both. Report at my office in the mornin'. Grover, you and Phil take the rest of the night off."

A week went by, and though they drew their pay, Quint and Jed had done nothing to earn it. Seated back of a lumber pile near the town corral, they were discussing the obvious fact that Ralston wasn't going to assign them to any crooked business which might work out to his disadvantage.

Three horsemen rode up to turn their mounts into the enclosure, conversing in cracked voices. Listening, Quint and Jed gathered that the notes they had given Ralston at the time of purchasing homesteads, were due the next day. One, named Thatcher, was urging his companions, Pangburn and Lasker, to risk what cash they had at faro.

"Unless we have the money to pay off," he added, "we'll be evicted. Ralston won't extend them notes."

"I never was a lucky gambler," Lasker objected.

"I've played faro before," Thatcher insisted. "I've got a system. You two just follow my lead. We're too old to start over if our land's taken from us this time."

"Well," Lasker said reluctantly, "if Pangburn goes in, I will."

"I'll take a chance," said Pangburn.

Quint had risen for a look at the three by the corral gate. All were white-haired, work-worn sodbusters.

Iredell said to Winslow, "I'm goin' up to the Easy Win."

They reached the gambling house well ahead of the slower walking homesteaders. Grover was idling behind his layout, the lookout getting a drink at the bar. Young Iredell greeted his father and Winslow with a lazy smile.

Quint said in a low voice, "There's three oldsters comin' here to wager their last dollars. Tryin' to get money to pay off the notes on their quarter sections. If they lose, they'll be up against it."

"What do you expect me to do?" asked Grover. "I'm workin' for Ralston. So are you."

"Am I?" Quint's tone sharpened. "You know better, and so does Polk. Grover, if you're a son of mine you'll deal a square game for once."

Stirrings of conscience had bothered Grover since his father's return. He met Quint's gaze levelly, crushed the cigarette he was smoking and opened the table drawer. He took out a new deck of cards, broke the seal.

"Liable to have trouble with Ralston over this," Grover remarked, replacing the cards in the deal box with the new deck.

"If you do," Quint was smiling now, "there'll be two guns to back you up."

QUINT retired to the bar with Jed as Thatcher, Pangburn and Lasker shuffled in. An hour later the homesteaders were jubilantly stuffing cash in their pockets. They had made a "killing" of several thousand dollars. When the oldsters had departed, Quint saw the lookout arguing with Grover. Finally the man went out and returned with Polk Ralston, who motioned Grover to a back room where private poker sessions were held.

Quint loosened gun in holster and glanced at Jed. He walked slowly toward the closed door, paused in earshot of the loud voices to roll a cigarette. Ralston was snarling:

"You must have used a straight deck!"

"I did." Grover's voice was calm. "Why not give the customers a break now and then?"

"I'm not in business to give 'em a break!" stormed Ralston. "I'd counted on gettin' three quarter sections from them fellows when they couldn't pay their notes. And you double-crossed me! By any chance did your father have a hand in—"

"You leave pop out of it!" Grover's tone thrilled the listener outside.

"Well," Ralston said heavily, "you haven't helped them plowmen as much as you think. I'll get the money and the land another way."

Quint retreated from the door, grinning happily. The boy had the stuff in him! But Polk's reference to getting land and money back "another way" struck an ominous note. At last there was work for Quint and Jed to do.

It was probable Ralston wouldn't send his gun-riders to collect before the following day, but Iredell and Winslow watched for a horseback party to leave town. Jed lingered in the vicinity of the land office, where gunmen usually came for orders, while Quint went to supper. They had been taking their meals at Angela Blaine's restaurant. Quint not only was grateful to her for giving him sanctuary the night of his return; he had a much deeper interest in Angela. He had told her he had served time, and the circumstances leading to his imprisonment.

Quint treasured her reply: "Seven years out of your life that should never

have been spent behind bars. It's a horrible example of injustice."

Tonight, as Quint sat down at his favorite table, he thought Angela more attractive than ever in a print frock, shining black hair piled high on her shapely head. But she did not look her usual cheerful self as she approached his table.

"Somethin' worrying you?" Quint asked.

Resting a hand on his chair-back, Angela nodded. "Ralston's raising my rent a couple of hundred dollars the first of the month. I can't pay it and stay in business."

Iredell's gray eyes glinted. "Must be tryin' to drive you out. What's the reason?"

She made a little grimace. "He asked me to marry him. I wouldn't—not if he was lined with gold."

"Lady," said Quint, "you have a bean on the right number. We'll see what can be done about it."

At the moment he had no idea what he could do. Ralston wasn't paying him enough to lend her two hundred dollars on short notice.

No gunman rode forth that night, but, early as Iredell and Winslow arose the next morning, the dust of four riders leaving Maricopa greeted their eyes as they stepped into the street. Quint feared that Phil might be one of them.

"No time for breakfast, Jed," he snapped. "Got to trail 'em. But we don't want any of the gang to see us saddlin'."

CHAPTER IV

THEY lost time getting out of Maricopa unobserved. But the trail of the gunmen was plain in the prairie sod, leading toward the range where Quint had long ridden for the Stirrup R and Jed had dragged a hungry loop. The old trails were fenced in, sodbusters' shacks loomed up where had been empty grassland, empty save for scattered groups of shorthorns.

Crossing a familiar timbered ridge, the trailers were startled by the muffled booming of guns. A half mile out from the foot of the ridge stood a cabin, four horses in front of it, reins grounded. Smoke drifted through an open window of the shack. Quint and Jed spurred down the slope.

Barbed wire barred their way but they found a gate and galloped through. Leaping from saddles a dozen paces from the cabin, they saw a thickset, bowlegged figure fill the doorway. Rowdy Driggs came out, eyeing them narrowly. Three others followed him, and Quint was relieved to see that none of them was Phil.

"What," said Rowdy, in a grating voice, "would you fellows be doin' here?"

"A little curious to know why it takes four gunslicks to collect money from three old plowmen," replied Iredell. "Whose homestead is this?"

"It used to belong to old man Thatcher," Rowdy said, with curling lip. "We found Pangburn and Lasker here, too. They hadn't the money to pay off their notes, said they'd fight before they'd be put off. Well, they're inside—dead."

"I happen to know all three had the money," Quint said grimly, "and were anxious to square their debt to hold the land."

"You know too much!" Driggs roared, his hands darting down.

Quint and Jed had brushed up on their shooting in the back lots of Maricopa. Rowdy's gun came out fast and smoking. But Quint was the quicker by a halved second. His bullet, plowing through the squat gunman's heart, raised Rowdy to his toes. He crashed on his face while a flurry of gun blasts rocked his trigger-finger pals.

All three had snatched out weapons. One toppled with Colt unfired. Quint and Jed concentrated fire on the other two, drilling them into a heel spin. They sprawled down, dying hard, striving desperately to lift guns grown too heavy for death-palsied hands. When they ceased to move, Quint strode to Driggs' body.

He found a stuffed money belt on the chief pistoleer and transferred it to his own waist beneath his shirt, remarking, "Too bad the oldsters never benefited by it, Jed, but it'll do some good, anyway. I hate to look at what's inside that cabin. We'll leave things just as they are. I want to worry Polk. He'll know a third party killed his men and took the money."

The noonday meal was being served at Angela Blaine's when Iredell and Winslow, all travel stains removed, appeared at the restaurant. While Jed ordered for both, Quint saw Angela alone and tendered the money belt.

"Put this in your safe," he said. "You wan't have to worry about that high rent for some time to come."

Angela looked alarmed. "But where—" she began.

"I didn't hold up anyone," Quint assured her. "It'll be payin' Ralston, you might say, in his own coin."

When Rowdy Driggs and pals failed to return from their murderous mission, Polk Ralston himself rode to Thatcher's homestead. As Iredell had figured, Polk

was greatly exercised by what he found there. Returning to Maricopa, he discovered horses with long familiar brands tied in front of his land office. Beating dusty hat against his leg, Polk walked in, overdoing his hearty greeting of the four grim cowmen seated around, smoking. Their answers were short. Haverstraw, Pelham, McLean and Findlay were fed up with losing stock.

"We're beginning to think, Polk," Haverstraw stated bluntly, "it ain't the homesteaders. We've been over every quarter section and can't find a single critter wearin' our brands. Like to know if you have any ideas on the subject."

IT WAS plain enough what he meant, but Polk continued to smile. "Who else would steal from you? Probably they slaughter the animals quick, burn or bury the hides." He looked from one to another of his visitors, thinking fast. "Still, they may keep the hides to tan. Homesteaders always have need of leather." He warmed to the idea. "If you can't find cattle on the hoof, why don't you make a thorough search for branded hides?"

"It's worth tryin'," admitted Haverstraw, rising. "We'll get at it tomorrow. Be seein' you, Polk."

They were scarcely beyond the town limits before Ralston summoned Phil Iredell and several other gunslingers to his office. He spoke of the cattlemen's visit, but, because Phil was present, didn't mention the passing of Rowdy Driggs' party and the men he suspected of having a hand in it.

"Go up the canyon where you're holdin' that rustled stuff," said Ralston. "Slaughter about twenty-five head and skin 'em. Then, soon's it's dark, plant a hide or two on every homestead you come to while the skins last. Haverstraw and them are gettin' wise to us. If they kill off a few sodbusters I won't have to wait for their notes to fall due."

Phil, squinting through cigarette smoke, said, "You're certainly a schemer, Ralston."

Polk frowned. "I don't know whether you mean that as a compliment or not. You and your brother are kinda outspoken to your boss."

He watched Phil scuff out, spurs clanking, trailed by the gun-tough gang. Ralston sank into the chair at his desk, a worried look in his cold eyes. Maybe he had too many irons in the fire. A couple of farm wagons rumbled by his door. Three more, then some young sodbusters on saddle horses. Ralston got up and looked out. There were fifteen or twenty homesteaders on the main street, all apparently heading for the same place—Polk's gambling house.

"What's goin' on, anyway?" he muttered, hitting the sidewalk. "Never knew 'em to come to town just to gamble. Don't have the money."

He paused in the doorway of the Easy Win, slitted eyes on the noisy crowd around the faro layout. An inkling of the truth came to Ralston as he listened to the loud talk. Heading homeward the previous afternoon, Thatcher, Pangburn and Lasker had told their nightbors how they had got the money to pay off Ralston, and these homesteaders, whose notes were due at no distant date, had flocked in to give their luck a whirl.

Moving closer, Polk caught Grover Iredell's eyes. The young gambler returned his boss's threatening look, went on calling the bets, slipping the pasteboards from the little box. Polk, glancing around the room, spied Quint and Jed drinking beer at a table. He strode to the bar for a drink. He needed it.

The homesteaders began raking in chips. The evening shadows crept in, the swinging lamps were lighted. The plowmen were still winning. Ralston, in a cold fury, signaled Grover to the bar.

"You're usin' a straight deck!" he accused. "I'm replacin' you with another dealer."

"If you do," said Grover, "I'll tell the crowd why. They'll make you considerable trouble."

He didn't wait for Ralston's answer. As he walked back to the layout, Grover noticed his father and Jed in attitudes of readiness.

Presently some of Ralston's gunmen drifted into the gambling house. They joined the boss at the bar and he began talking earnestly. Afterward they took their stand in various parts of the room. None of this escaped the elder Iredell and Winslow.

"Jed," said Quint, "slide out and fetch three saddled horses."

Winslow was gone twenty minutes. Hardly had he resumed his chair at the table where Quint still sat, when Grover announced, turning his deal box on its side:

"Game's closed, boys. The bank is busted!"

BUT the homesteaders were satisfied and trooped to the bar to celebrate, leaving Grover alone at the table. The lookout's hurried exit served as a warning to Grover. For the first time he observed the grimly waiting gunmen. He glanced at his father, slowly pushed his chair back.

"The boy's wise to the setup, Jed," Quint spoke out of the side of his mouth. "You shoot at the lights, I'll take care of the Coltmen."

Quint's eyes sought Ralston. Polk raised hand to hatbrim, then suddenly ducked from sight. At his signal, a gun blazed from a corner. Quint and Jed shot out of their chairs, kicking over the table. Iredell's Colt smoked answer to the gunman who had fired, curling him up in the corner. Winslow's .45 tilted up, roaring, and the five swinging lamps began crashing. Quint had seen Grover dive under the faro table as lead buzzed his way.

Before the last lamp went out, Quint laid his sights on a second gunman. Jed's gun was silent while he reloaded. But Quint shot at the spurts of flame centered on the overturned table. The thud of falling bodies proved he wasn't wasting bullets.

He broke for the door, loading as he ran. Jed, tight at his heels, took up the deadly tune. By the bark of his derringer, Quint, knew Grover was just ahead of them. They pelted through the doorway, Jed shouting:

"Tied our broncs to that lamp post yonder. No room at the rack."

They scrambled into saddles and reined away as Colts roared at them from the door of the Easy Win. Ralston had a lot more gunmen in town, and they expected pursuit. Thundering out of Maricopa, the trio struck northward for the old range.

"You did yourself proud, Grover," Quint said, as they galloped.

"At any rate," Grover replied, "I've dealt my last card."

They rode for an hour without sighting pursuers on the backtrack. Then, from the west, came the sounds of wagon wheels and trotting horsemen. The trio pulled up in a thicket. The night riding party approached their covert, and Quint tensed as he recognized Phil's voice raised in argument with another rider.

"Don't care what you say, Loper, it's a low-down trick to play on the sodbusters. When the cowmen find these hides we're plantin', they're goin' to use a rope or a gun on them innocent farmers. It's too tough, even for me."

"You'd better resign as gun-rider for Polk if you're gettin' soft," snorted Loper.

The wagon passed the thicket, and Quint counted ten men riding beside it. Too many for his little party to risk a battle. Evidently, he thought, Ralston's old neighbors were getting suspicious of him and he was seeking to avert a showdown. As the hoofbeats and rumble of wheels grew fainter, Quint spoke to his companions.

"We could warn the homesteaders about the hides, but we need the cattlemen's support to clean up Ralston's gang. You heard Phil. Sounded like he's sick of the game. We're ridin' to Haverstraw's tonight."

Clem Haverstraw gave Quint heartier welcome than he expected. The cowman listened grimly as he unfolded Ralston's scheme to blind his cattlemen friends to his own guilt. Clem agreed to Quint's plan for dealing the final blow to the man who had victimized cowmen and homesteaders alike."

"Pelham, Findlay and McLean will be here in the mornin' with their outfits," stated Haverstraw. "If your boy Phil don't expose Polk's game like you figure, you can step forward, Quint. On your account, we'll overlook Phil's part in the cattle stealin'."

"That's fine, Clem," Quint smiled. "But I think he'll come through. It's a sort of test I'm puttin' him to."

Without bloodshed, fourteen protesting sodbusters were taken prisoner by the cattlemen the following day. By noon the outfits were heading for Maricopa. A wagon of Haverstraw's carried the green hides found on the quarter sections.

CHAPTER V

POLK RALSTON was in his office when informed of the cavalcade's approach. It made him uneasy that the cattlemen were bringing captive sodbusters to Maricopa, instead of hanging them at the spot where the hides had been unearthed. Hastily gathering his gunmen, Polk walked to meet the incoming riders at the edge of town.

His distrust of the situation mounted upon discovering the two Iredells and Winslow with the ranchers. Phil himself was puzzled to see his father and brother in such company. He had been told of their flight, following the gunfight at the Easy Win, and was sore at Ralston, not sure what to do about it.

"I see I wasn't wrong, boys," Ralston boldly greeted the rangemen. "You found the hides, like I told you. Fetchin' the prisoners to jail? Sheriff's out of town."

"He usually is," Haverstraw answered grimly. "No, we're swingin' the thieves. Thought you'd like to be a witness. That tree yonder"—he pointed to a big oak at the entrance to town—"is a ready-made gallows."

The horsemen halted, Quint, Grover and Jed swinging down with the rest. The homesteaders were pulled from sad-

dles and fitted with hemp cravats. A few begged for their lives, but most were silent, trying to meet this unjust fate with fortitude. A procession started for the gallows tree, each homesteader led by a cowpuncher.

"Don't you and your men want a hand in pullin' the ropes, Polk?" Haverstraw called.

"No," said Ralston, "we'll just watch."

Somehow, he didn't believe the cowmen would go through with the wholesale hanging. But in Phil Iredell's seething mind there was no uncertainty. Sweat beaded his forehead as he watched the homesteaders march to the gallows. Suddenly he stepped out of the Ralston ranks, hand on gun, turned sideways to sweep an eye on the gang he was deserting.

"This dirty work's gone far enough!" Phil shouted. "The sodbusters didn't steal and skin them cows. It was us Ralston riders. Polk ordered it to keep the owners from—"

Thirty yards away, Quint's eyes glowed with pride. But only for an instant. He saw guns leap to the hands of Ralston men. His own gun flicked from leather, barked once, and a Coltman throwing down on Phil stumbled out of line. Phil, firing from the hip, got another. Then he dropped flat, Colt still smoking. His father, brother and Winslow were running toward him, pitching lead into the suddenly active Ralston forces.

Polk, trigger-twitching with the others, was backing away. Quint felt a bullet slice his shoulder. He plunged on, shooting low, saw Ralston stagger. Two flame-lashing gunmen got between their boss and Iredell. They stopped Quint's rush, and for sixty smoky seconds he was busy trading shots with the pair. When he looked for Polk again, he spied him running up the street.

Haverstraw, his friends and cowboys had jerked iron and waded in at the first shot, leaving the homesteaders with ropes trailing from their necks. Outnumbered, Ralston's gunmen were driven back inside the town, fighting stubbornly. Phil Iredell had jumped to his feet before father or brother could reach him, his pistol wreathing smoke.

Quint, reloading, shot his way around the right flank of the gunmen, avid to overtake Ralston. Pounding up the sidewalk, he was in time to see Ralston dart into the land office. Quint glanced over his shoulder. The Coltmen's retreat had ended at the bars of the town corral. But Quint knew they hadn't a chance of mounting and riding away. Cattlemen and cowboys were closing in on three sides, Grover, Phil and old Jed in the van of the attackers.

As Quint was passing Angela Blaine's restaurant, a waitress stepped out suddenly and grabbed his arm.

"I thought you ought to know, Mr. Iredell," she cried excitedly. "We haven't seen Miss Blaine since noon. She went to Ralston's office to pay the rent. I looked all over town, but—"

"I'm glad you told me," Quint broke in. "Right now I'm after Ralston. See you later."

QUINT wondered if Polk had anything to do with Angela's disappearance. It was probable that he had. Quint's mouth was a grim slash as he cautiously entered the land office. The front room was empty, but the closed door at the rear caught his eye. Usually it stood open. His boots clacked across the floor. He put out his left hand to palm the doorknob, then drew it back. Polk's voice spoke on the other side of the door.

"Come in without knockin', Quint! I've been expecting you!"

Iredell heard a muffled sound, as though someone were trying to talk through a handkerchief gag.

"Miss Blaine in there with you, Ralston?" he crackled.

"She sure is," grated Polk. "Tied to a chair, and I'm behind it. The minute you open that door, I'll let you have a dose of lead!"

Quint stood silent, his jaw rigid. He couldn't take a chance of injuring the girl by bursting in, shooting as he crossed the threshold. The sound of a quick step outside drew him to the street entrance. Jed Winslow was mounting the stoop.

"I saw you duck in here," panted Jed. "We got 'em all by the corral. Grover and Phil's right side up—"

"Listen," Quint interrupted in a low voice. "Ralston's in the back room. Got Angela tied up, usin' her as a shield. There's a window on the side. You go round and pitch a rock through it, to divert his attention. Don't show yourself at the window or he'll drill you."

Jed nodded and whisked around the corner. Quint walked softly back to the closed door. Gun in his right hand, his left touched the knob. At a sudden crash of glass, the bellow of a Colt, Quint swung the door wide, half stooping. Ralston had stepped two paces beyond the chair in which Angela was bound, his gun focused on the shattered window.

He spun at the creak of the door hinges, eyes protruding, his thumb hitting the hammer prong. But the Colt tilted up as the hammer dropped, for Quint's lead

tore through the left side of his coat. Polk reeled with bullet shock. Quint centered two more shots on the weaving figure, and Ralston's rubbery legs let him down with a jarring thud. The cold eyes were fixed and staring, the steel-trap mouth hung open.

Quint was freeing the badly shaken Angela when Jed stuck his head up at the broken window.

"That got him, did it, Quint?"

"Nice work, Jed."

Winslow grinned at the girl. "I'll see you both outside," he said, and his face vanished.

Quint chafed Angela's arms, watching her efforts to speak and murmuring, "Take your time, take your time." As color seeped into her white face, he said, "I've got an idea how this happened. One of your waitresses told me you'd come up here to pay your rent and never returned. Ralston was suspicious where the money came from, eh?"

"Yes," nodded Angela. "He hadn't expected I'd be able to pay. When I wouldn't admit you'd given it to me, he threatened to keep me a prisoner till I talked. Quint, I know you didn't steal that money, but where did you get it?"

He told her. "The poor old sodbusters were dead, and I thought it should be put to good use. If I'd had any notion it would expose you to danger—"

"But I'm all right, you see." She stood up, smiling.

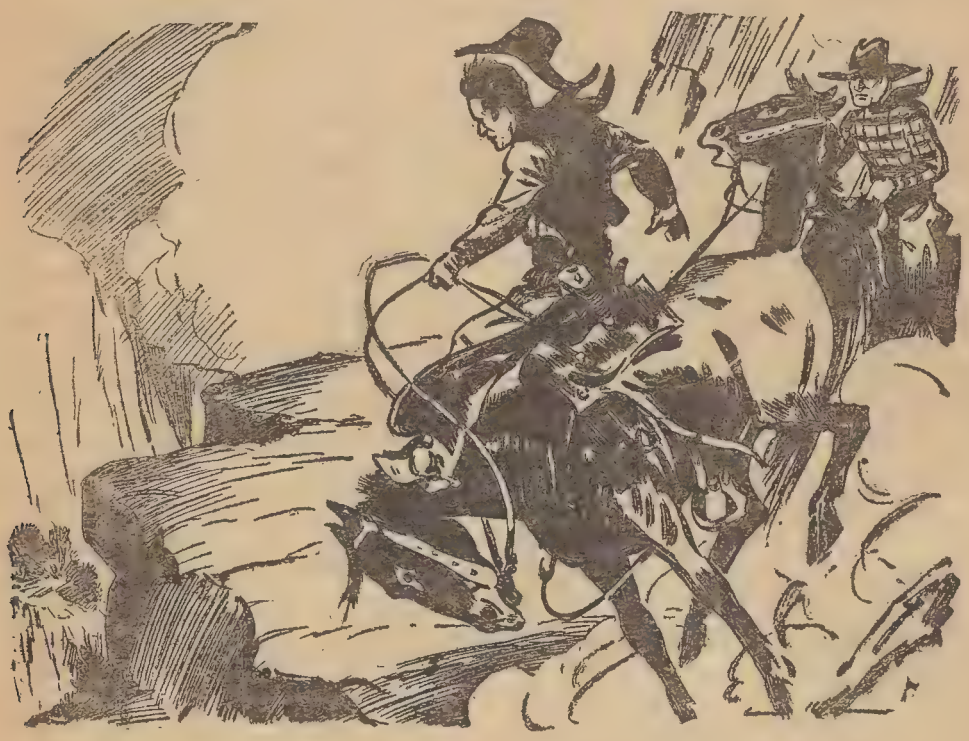
"And very lovely," Quint said softly, his face aglow. "Ralston's power is broken forever, my two sons have made good. There's plenty land for all of us, includin' Winslow, to homestead. I'd like to run a few cattle myself. Would you consider marryin' a small rancher, when he gets his start? I'd do my utmost to make you happy, Angela."

"I was reared on a farm," replied Angela. "Nothing would please me more than to go back to the land and help the man I love to get a fresh start."

Quint drew her into his arms, a strong, safe refuge.

The lobo laughter of a cunning killer turned into a howl of horror when he heard that . . .

Blizzard Track Mockery



By Gunnison Steele

IT WAS a savagely cold January day when Cort Shamus, wickedly desperate, saddled his horse and rode to the north. His fast-dwindling Circle Bar herds had to have hay, or he was ruined. Only one man on all that blizzard-doomed range had hay: Old Sundown Pelly. And Sundown hated Cort Shamus with a bitter, consuming hatred.

There was no autumn that year on the Staghorn range. By late August raw winds whined across the basin, ice rimmed the waterholes, and the wild, lonely honking of wild geese filled the chill nights. Each dawn brought a whiter frost; each day cattle huddled in tighter knots in the shelter of ravines and cutbanks. Old-timers shook their hoary heads gloomily.

By mid-October, howling, snarling winter had set in. Blizzard followed blizzard, lashing the range with frigid fury. Herds of gaunt-flanked cattle, their eyes frost-seared and bewildered, drifted before the storms. Many of them died, choking the ravines with their frozen carcasses. The cowmen fought this incredibly savage onslaught the best they could, their faces haggard and frost-blackened, their minds reeling from weariness and the fierce cold.

Snow drifted to unheard of depths. It filled ravines and potholes to the rims, making them death traps for the unwary, whether man or beast. There was no forage for cattle; and under their ravenous attacks haystacks vanished with unbelievable speed. Cowmen who had thought

themselves fixed for the winter now found themselves without hay by January. A whole range faced almost utter ruin.

All except old Sundown Pelly. He had plenty of hay, many times more than enough for the few cattle he owned. A few years before, Sundown Pelly had owned a pretty big outfit. Hundreds of head of fat cattle had grazed his range. That was before Cort Shamus had moved in next to him and started crowding.

Shamus, an arrogant, evil man, driven by unholy ambition, had shown no mercy. By sly trickery, by threats, by open and brutal force, he had forced Sundown Pelly off one portion of his range after another, not being content until Sundown was crowded onto a meager hundred acres with his back to the hills.

Sundown had accepted his defeat with outward resignation. Long hours he sat and stared across the fertile range that had been his, until folks said his mind was warped. Their belief was strengthened when he sold most of his cattle—and started raising hay. He didn't sell the hay. Year after year he hoarded it, stacking it in enormous stacks. Sundown and his hay became something of a joke on the Staghorn range.

But now, when the earth lay frozen under its snowy shroud of death, Sundown had hay when few others did. To one after another he refused to sell, bringing down upon himself their furious wrath. And the deadly blizzards continued. Each dawn a freezing wind lashed the range and at dark it still snarled its violent rage like an infuriated beast. Cattle dropped in their tracks, or died on their feet leaning against walls or cutbanks. And of all the Staghorn outfits, Cort Shamus's stolen Circle Bar stood to lose the most.

SO BIG, beak-nosed Cort Shamus, desperate, but still arrogant, came to Sundown Pelly's log ranch house on this bitter January day. Sundown, a wiry, bearded oldster, greeted him without cordiality, but invited him into the warm cabin. Shamus hovered over the stove, rubbing his hands, grumbling about the weather.

Sundown interrupted bluntly, "What do you want here, Shamus?"

"Why, I was just ridin' by," Shamus said. "And it come to me that we hadn't been too neighborly of late."

"Took you a long time to decide it. Well, you ain't wanted here. State what you came for, and get out."

Shamus held his temper. "Fact is, Sundown, I rode over to see you about some hay."

"Circle Bar out of hay?"

"Fed the last I had a couple of days ago. But I ain't been worryin'—I knew you had plenty, more than you'll ever need. I'll take some of it off your hands."

Sundown snapped, "Like hell you will!"

"What's that you said?"

"I said, like hell you will, Cort Shamus! You won't get a sprig of my hay."

Shamus quit smiling and his pale eyes narrowed. "Mebby you misunderstood me, Pelly. I aim to *buy* that hay."

"But I don't aim to sell it. Get this straight, Shamus: I don't give a blue damn if every head of cattle you got starves, and you with 'em! I raised that hay, it's mine, and I'd burn it before I'd sell it to you!"

"You crack-brained old coot!" Shamus snarled. "I aim to be fair—I'm offerin' to pay a good price for hay. If you didn't aim to sell that hay, why'd you raise it?"

"That's a fair question." Sundown sat down and he smiled slowly. "You remember, Shamus, when you crowded Sam Redman off his strip of land ten years ago, moved in and called it the Circle Bar? Then you brought in a gang of tough riders, started spreadin' out, started crowdin' me.

"I was grazin' a lot of land in them days, Shamus. But you played so rough I couldn't keep riders. You kept crowdin' me, until finally you shoved me back onto this little strip you didn't want anyway and let me stay here. That's where you made your mistake.

"You see, Shamus, I been in this country a long time. A winter like this one comes only once ever' fifteen-twenty years—but it allus comes. Then it's unadulterated hell. That's why I started raisin' and stackin' hay. I been waitin'."

"Waitin' for what?"

"For this winter. For you to run out of hay, with no way of gettin' more, and your cow critters to start pilin' up in the ravines and along drift fences. For you to come whinin' and beggin' me for hay. Now it's happened. And you can go plumb to hell, Shamus!"

Shamus lunged at the runty oldster, grabbed him by the throat and shook him savagely, wicked rage spilling from his little eyes. Sundown didn't try to fight back. Then suddenly Shamus released him.

"I've got to have hay," Cort Shamus said hoarsely. "If I don't get it my critters'll die, I'll be ruined. My land's already mortgaged, but if I had hay I could pull through in the spring. If I ever mistreated you, Pelly, I'll make up for it. I've learned my lesson. Just sell me some hay—"

"My hay ain't for sale!" Sundown repeated harshly, unmoved by Shamus's pleading. "But I'll give it to you—on one condition."

"What condition?"

"That you buy my strip of land."

"For how much?"

"Twenty thousand dollars!"

Shamus stared. "You loco, old man? This place ain't worth more'n a tenth of that."

Sundown shrugged. "Twenty thousand, for the place and everything on it. If it's too high, don't buy it."

"But that'd be robbery—"

"Just like it was when you kept crowdin' me off my land. I figure twenty thousand'd just about cover what you rooked me out of. With that hay throwed in, you'd still be gettin' the best of the deal. Make up your mind, quick, and get to hell out of my house!"

SHAMUS cursed furiously, then said, "I'll do it! For the land, hay, the few cattle you've got." He whipped out a check book and started writing.

"I thought you said you was in hard shape," Sundown said warily. "How do I know a check'd be good?"

"If you're scared, I'll go with you to the bank. They'll pay off—they'll have to. Write me out a bill of sale."

Sundown hesitated, then produced a pencil and piece of paper and started scrawling. He gave Shamus the bill of sale in exchange for the check. He scrutinized the check carefully, then folded it and put it in his pocket.

"We'll go to the bank, right now," he declared. "I ain't takin' your word about this check, Cort Shamus."

Shamus agreed, and ten minutes later they rode away from Sundown's cabin and headed toward the town of Staghorn. It was still snowing hard, and it was still bitterly cold with a fierce and shrilly trumpeting wind sweeping the basin. Snow lay three feet deep in level spots, with a frozen crust on top but soft and treacherous underneath. Against windbreaks it had drifted several times deeper.

They followed the trail Shamus had made coming in, along a snow-covered trail through rough terrain toward the spot where it connected with the main wagon road five miles from Sundown Pelly's place. This was isolated country. The trail was fringed by cliffs and ravines and potholes. But both Sundown and Shamus knew where these snow-filled ravines and holes were.

So Cort Shamus chose his spot very carefully.

Here the trail ran parallel to a steep-walled ravine that was all of twenty feet deep. It had drifted full of snow so that a stranger would not have suspected the ravine was there. But Shamus knew exactly where the rim lay.

Old Sundown was riding along with his head tucked against the driving snow and wind, between Shamus and the snow-filled ravine. Shamus swerved his big sorrel suddenly, dug in the spurs, driving the sorrel savagely against Sundown's smaller roan.

The roan was knocked sidewise off the trail. Its threshing hoofs missed solid footing as it lunged over the rim of the ravine. It sank down, grunting and churning the lose snow with its forefeet.

Sundown yelled with alarm, grabbed for the saddle horn, but missed and tumbled backward. He vanished almost instantly in the loose snow. The struggling horse got its front feet over the ravine's rim. It struggled upward, pawing and slashing with all four hoofs, until it was again on the trail.

But Sundown was still in the ravine. Occasionally, Shamus could see him. Sundown was fighting the snow furiously, trying to reach the side of the ravine, to get a hold on something solid so he could clamber out of the shifting, caving snow that was trying to smother him.

But fast as he clawed the soft snow away from his face more caved in on top of him. Shamus could see his pale, bearded face, his open mouth, his staring eyes. Sundown knew Shamus was trying to murder him, and as he struggled there in the pit his hatred was a live, searing thing blazing up at Shamus. Shamus watched, coldly impersonal, gun in hand. But he didn't use the gun, wouldn't unless he had to.

And he didn't have to. Sundown was very near the rim, when his fierce struggles ceased abruptly and he sank beneath the snow, leaving only a tiny pit where he had vanished. Shamus stared warily at the spot. Quickly the pit in the snow filled, leaving no trace of what had happened.

After thirty minutes, convinced that no man encased in that mass of snow could survive, Shamus rode on toward Staghorn.

He was highly satisfied. Sundown Pelly's horse would return home. But Sundown's disappearance would not be discovered for hours, maybe days. Long before then the tracks of his and Sundown's horses would have disappeared. Nobody knew he had gone to Sundown's place today.

Shamus swore suddenly, remembering his check in Sundown's pocket. He

stopped, debating whether to go back and try to retrieve it, and decided against it. He would need a shovel—and possibly Sundown wasn't dead yet. Shamus could dig down and get the check at any time. There was no way of tracing Sundown to his snowy grave; probably he wouldn't be discovered until the snow melted. By then the check would be unrecognizable, anyway.

FEELING easier, Cort Shamus rode on, reaching Staghorn at midafternoon. He made the round of saloons, making it a point to exhibit the bill of sale for Sundown Pelly's place, including the hay and cattle on it. He even showed the paper to blocky, red-haired Sheriff Tom O'Hara.

Sheriff O'Hara looked thoughtfully at the crude writing on the paper: *For the sum of one dollar . . . and other considerations . . . I hereby sell to Cort Shamus my land and everything on it. . .* Beyond doubt, it was Sundown's writing.

"When did this happen?" O'Hara asked.

"Yesterday," Shamus lied.

"Sundown hates you like poison—and besides, he's refused to sell hay to a dozen men. How come he'd sell to you?"

Shamus shrugged, grinned. "Mebby he liked the smell of the shiny, new hundred dollar bills I stuck under his nose. I paid him off in cash. It took all I had, but now I'm settin' purty if it snows till July!"

He got up and swaggered out. He had seen the open suspicion in Sheriff O'Hara's eyes, but he was certain he had nothing to worry about.

It was midafternoon of the next day when Sheriff Tom O'Hara stopped by the Circle Bar. Snow still fell, the wind still snapped and snarled across the stricken basin. Shamus invited the blocky lawman into the warm house with a show of friendliness. He felt no uneasiness.

"Wasn't nobody crazy enough to commit a crime in this kind of weather, was they?" Shamus grinned.

O'Hara shook his head. "Can't say. I'm on my way over to Sundown Pelly's place. Sundown has disappeared."

Shamus looked surprised. "He disappeared?"

"Might call it that. Sam Hite rode into town about noon. He'd just come from Sundown's place where he'd gone to see about buyin' some hay. Sundown wasn't there. But he found Sundown's horse, saddled and nearly froze to death, behind the barn. It was plain, Sam said, that the horse had been there all night. Sundown's bed hadn't been slept in, his stove was cold."

"Sounds queer, all right," Shamus admitted. "Looks like Sundown started out somewhere yesterday, or last night, and got throwed. Mebby he made it to shelter."

O'Hara shook his head, frowning. "His own place, or yours, would have been closest. Then there's what Slim Corley woke me up and told me last night."

"What was that?"

"Why, he claims he saw Sundown yesterday about dusk—"

"About dusk?"

The sheriff looked quickly at Shamus. Shamus had spoken sharply, was staring at O'Hara.

"Well, he *thinks* it was Sundown," declared the sheriff. "Slim was ridin' in from the Bar 2, and just as he come to the spot where the trail from Sundown's cabin connects with the main road, he looked up and somebody was standin' there in the road before him. Slim didn't see where he come from.

"Well, it was snowin', and gettin' dark, and Slim couldn't see good, but he swears the gent there in the trail was Sundown Pelly. Sundown looked and acted funny—pale, and when he stepped close to look up at Slim he moved stiff and jerky, like—well, like a dead man, or one near about dead."

CORT SHAMUS had got very still. A thin thread of fear was twisting through him as he asked in husky tones, "Then what happened?"

"Why, Slim asked Sundown what he wanted. But Sundown—if it was him—just shook his head, and sort of disappeared back among the trees bordering the trail. Like a ghost, Slim said. After he reached town he got to thinkin' about it, and woke me up and told me. That was before Sam Hite found Sundown's horse this mornin', of course, so I figured Slim'd had one too many.

"Now—I dunno. From what Slim said, Sundown must have been waitin' there beside the trail for somebody. It was after dark when you left town last night, Shamus. Did you see anybody along there?"

"Hell, no!" Shamus laughed, a little shrilly. "Slim Corley musta been drunk as a fiddler crab!"

"Mebby, mebby not. Anyway, I'm ridin' over to Sundown's place and I'd like for you to go with me."

Shamus asked suspiciously, "Why you want me along?"

"Why, you was the last to see Sundown. Day before yesterday, wasn't it? Course, if you'd rather not—"

"Sure, I'll go," Shamus said quickly. "I'm ready to start."

They talked little on the eight mile ride to Sundown Pelly's cabin. They rode with coat collars up, heads lowered against the bitter wind. Uncertainty was clamoring inside Cort Shamus. Slim Corley couldn't have seen Sundown at dusk—because he, Shamus, had watched Sundown sink under a shifting mass of snow hours before. Even if Sundown had escaped the death trap he would have tried to reach shelter, instead of roaming about in the blizzard.

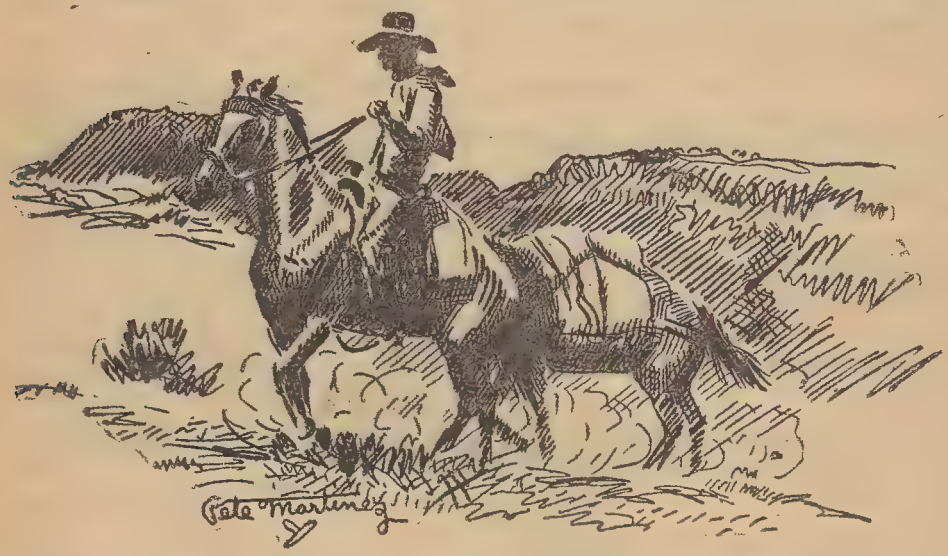
Pale, stiff, like a dead man—like he was waiting there beside the trail for somebody...

Superstition stirred inside Shamus. He looked sharply at the sheriff. O'Hara was erect in the saddle, was staring off to their right toward a snow-laden thicket. He glanced at Shamus.

"Thought I saw somebody dodge back into that thicket," he said. "You see anybody?"

Shamus shook his head.

"A little old man, all covered over with snow and ice, looked like," the sheriff muttered. "I've had a feelin', the last coupla miles, somebody was follow-in' us. You felt it?"



"Why — why — hell, no!" Shamus snarled. "Who'd be followin' us?"

"Dunno!" O'Hara shook his head frowningly. They rode on.

Like a ghost, Slim Corley had said. Shamus swore with silent fury, and thereafter his gaze roamed restlessly along each side of the trail. He'd watched that snow-filled ravine swallow its victim. He was a fool, he told himself, to listen to this talk of a shambling, ice-covered old man roaming in the dusk.

They had just reached the spot where Sundown Pelly's trail branched off, when Shamus saw the figure. It was standing back a hundred feet from the trail, motionless, etched sharply against a line of snow-shrouded trees. It was, Shamus saw instantly, old Sundown Pelly!

His sorrel bumped into Sheriff Tom O'Hara's mount and stopped. Shamus sat very still, panic gibbering through him, staring at that ghostly figure. Sundown's clothes were snow-covered, and icicles dangled from the floppy brim of his old hat. His face was startlingly white, exactly as Shamus had last seen it, with mouth and eyes wide. And he was staring straight at Cort Shamus!

Then, suddenly, Sundown started walking — toward them! He walked stiffly, arms straight at his side, stumbling occasionally, but never taking his eyes off Shamus.

THE panic inside Shamus thinned to a wild and desperate crescendo. By a furious effort he broke the paralytic bonds that had held him, and grabbed for his gun. Its coughing roar sounded puny amid the storm's tumult.

Sheriff O'Hara yelled, "Quit it, you loco fool—that's Sundown Pelly!" and he grabbed at Shamus' gun-arm.

Shamus writhed away, snarling with terror and fury. "That ain't Sundown Pelly—it *couldn't* be! I watched him die —I saw him sink under the snow."

The sheriff spat, "I knew you done it

—I just wanted to hear you admit it!" He lunged from the saddle in a headlong dive, smashing Shamus to the snow.

They rolled over and over there in the deep snow, like two clawing, snarling, fighting cats. Shamus knew now that he'd been tricked, and he fought savagely, with all his wicked cunning.

But by now Sundown Pelly had come up, no longer shuffling stiffly, but floundering swiftly through the snow. He snaked a gun from under his sheepskin coat, and hit Shamus with it. Cort Shamus moaned and went limp there in the snow.

But he wasn't unconscious, and after a moment he sat up, moaning and rubbing his head. He looked dazedly at Sundown Pelly.

He stammered, "Now—I thought—"

"Yeah, you thought I was under twenty feet of snow," Sundown said wrathfully, "That's where you made a little mistake."

Shamus knew he was beaten. He said sullenly, "I saw you go under the snow. I stayed there a long time, and you didn't come out."

Sheriff O'Hara chuckled.

"No mystery to it, Shamus. You know the floors of these ravines are covered with boulders, and some of 'em have overhanging ledges. You should know that when loose snow drifts in it sometimes leaves air pockets among these boulders and ledges, some half as big as a room. Well, Sundown sunk down into one of these air pockets between a big boulder and the ravine wall. He stayed there, fairly comfortable, until he was pretty sure you'd left.

"Then he started tunnelin' up the wall, packin' the snow tight as he went to keep it from cavin'. He made it out all right and got back to his cabin. After thawin' out he rode into town and told me what had happened. Course, I could have jailed you on what evidence I had; but it would have been just Sundown's word against yours, and I wanted to be mighty sure of sendin' you to the pen. So we cooked up this little scheme to make you confess. You paid a pretty high price for that hay, after all, Shamus."

"I didn't buy any hay," Shamus sneered. "The check I gave that old coot ain't any good. I ain't got a dollar in the bank."

"That being the case, I reckon any jury in Montana would tell Sundown to collect the twenty thousand in Circle Bar cattle and land. Looks like Sundown's back right where he was when you started crowdin' him ten years ago, sittin' pretty. Your cussedness took away his land and cattle, now it's givin' 'em back. Funny, ain't it, Shamus?"

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Remember—
PAPER IS WAR POWER
Use Less Paper—Save All Wastepaper

The Chisel'em Trail

By Joe Archibald

Every beehive must have its drones, opined Butterball Epps and Gabby Snead when they signed on at the Busy Bee ranch. But because these work-hatin' hombres expected to loaf and live, they found themselves in a hornets' nest of tin-star stingers.

BUTTERBALL EPPS and Gabby Snead, cowpoke without employment and thankful thereof, happened to ride through a little settlement near the western Wyoming line called Jawbone Junction one night just before sundown. They left their saddles long enough to indulge in necessary refueling and to refuse an offer of a pair of jobs from a ranch foreman who was in town, and stock up on flour and bacon and coffee.

Gabby stretched luxuriously just before he got back into the saddle. Butterball was lolling in his when a tall hombre whose profession was evident suddenly intoned:

—Their only labor to kill time,
An' labor dire it is, an' weary woe;
They sit, they loll, turn over idle rhyme
Then gittin' up, to the glass they go—

"A sky pilot," Butterball said. "Where's his flock?"

"Huh?" Gabby snorted. "He is lookin' right at us an' must mean us, Butterball."

"Yep? Listen, parson," the rolypoly man called out. "Idleness is a appendix to nobility. Ever hear that one?"

"Begone," the sin-buster said. "Take out the appendix and you are just a bum. Begone, wastrels."

"Give us time," Gabby sniffed. "We

ain't in no hurry to stay here. C'mon, Butterball."

The mismated jaspers shook the dust of Jawbone Junction off the hoofs of their broncs as they rode a beaten path toward a range of low hills. "What's our financial standin', Butterball?" Gabby asked. "I figger I can assay a hundred an' eighty dollars."

"I got about that," the rotund ranny said with a yawn. "Represents five months hard labor on a cattle spread. Ah, independence from work is a great thing, ain't it? Where'll we camp, huh?"

"Closest as we kin git to kindlin' wood an' runnin' water," Gabby grinned. "I—listen, Butterball!"

The obese idler had heard. The whicker of a bronc, the warning cry from the line of timber just ahead. Then a gun went off and Gabby Snead's hat spun around on his head, a neat little hole appearing in the crown. The waddies left their saddles in haste and flattened out. In their prone positions, they heard the frantic *clippity-clop* of horses' hoofs.

"What you think, Butterball?"

"Huh? Rustlers or badmen is what. Thought we was maybe part of a posse. Let's go up an' see if they left any tracks or things. They've vamoosed."

Cautiously, six-guns ready to operate, Butterball and Gabby rode into the timber and got out of their saddles once more in a little clearing. Here, Butterball stooped over and came up with a big mail sack that had been disemboweled with a knife-blade.

"Stage robbers, Gabby!"

"Naw!" Butterball snorted. "How could you tell? Here is a couple of letters didn't reach where they was goin'. H'm-m-m, this one is addressed to Judge Nemo F. Spums, Box 71, New Galilee, Wyomin'."

"Next town," Gabby said. "I saw it on a signpost. You smell what I do, you ball of taller?"

"Nope. Just pine needles."

"I smell the inside of a calaboose, so drop that mail sack an' lets pilgrim 'fore—"

"Put 'em up, both of you gents!"

QUICKLY Butterball Epps pocketed the letter and elevated his hands. Gabby uttered a frightened squeak and did likewise. A tall hombre stepped toward them, his white teeth gleaming in the dusk. "So you robbed the stage a hour ago, huh? What you git?"

"Nothin'." Butterhall gulped. "Just some o' letters was in the bag. We didn't rob no—"

"Hand over what money you stole. Me, I'm ridin' through in a hurry an' can't stop to argue," the stranger said. "Could stop over in Jawbone Junction long enough, though, to give a description of the badmen. Might've shot the stage driver fer all I know, so you would hang sooner or later."

"What'll we do, Gabby?"

"Go look for work when this gent leaves us, you li'l cantaloop. What else?"

Fifteen minutes later, Butterball and Gabby stood looking at each other with frightened expressions on their faces.

"Every last ding danged cent, Butterball," said Gabby mournfully. "We are paupers."

"Of all the low-down—but we got to git out of here an' pronto, as if a posse comes we will lose our breath too, huh? We'll head fer the nearest ranch."

"Work," Gabby choked out as he forked his horse. "To think I'd come to that—sooner than I figgered."

"I hear noises I don't like," the fat cowpoke grunted and gave his bay bronc a touch of steel.

An hour later they circled the town of New Galilee warily and picked up a rough road that snaked northeast. Topping a hogback and dropping down a slope and clattering over a corduroy bridge that spanned a meadow brook, Gabby spotted a little cluster of buildings.

"Look, Butterball, a l'il spread which won't mean too much work. Let's see if they need a couple of hands."

"I'm afraid so," Butterball said sadly.

They rode up to the gate and a lopsided wooden sign nailed to a tired fence said:

BUSY BEE RANCH
Ike Dilly, Prop.

"Busy Bee," Butterball snickered. "It ain't buzzed much fer a long time. Lookit that bunkhouse with the roof like a swaybacked nester's horse. All them poles keepin' the barn from cavin' in. Yep, this looks like just what we want, Gabby. Let's see if the boss is alive."

"Don't knock on the ranch house door too hard," Gabby said. "The place'll fall plumb apart."

They got out of their saddles and walked to the front porch and saw there were signs of life on the Busy Bee. Butterball knocked softly. A few moments later a little banty with a curtain fringe mustache opened up.

"Yep?"

"We are two tophands seekin' employment," Gabby said. "Could you use help?"

"Huh? Oh, Godfrey!" Ike Dilly snickered, banged the flat of his hand against

his knee and nearly went into a convulsion of mirth. He turned his head. "Milly, did you hear the cuss? Help, he says!"

"Ask them in, Father. After all they may be a little hungry," a soft voice said.

"Sure, come in an' have some ragweed greens, some two days old coffee an' a hard biskit or two," Ike said, and Gabby and Butterball stepped into the house. A girl with flaxen hair and eyes of a violet hue smiled at them and Butterball's knees got rubbery. "My daughter, Milly," Ike said. "What was it you said ag'in? Oh, yep—employment. Haw!"

"That's what I think of work too," Gabby gulped. "A couple of hours ago we was laughin' at it too, Dilly. Nope, we come to the wrong place."

"Look, gents," Dilly said. "I'm sellin' out to Judge Nemo Spume fer five hundred dollars in a couple weeks. Got fifty moth-et cows, a goat, three hens an' a rooster, and two broncs. I'm mortgaged up to my boots an' the judge is sure kind as he could take it fer taxes if he wanted."

"Judge Nemo—" Butterball muttered. "I—er—look, even fer this spread, that is robbery. Good range land?"

"Awful," Dilly said. "Goin' to be worst fer Milly though. She'll have to go East an' live with her aunt. Stuck on a cowpoke who works fer a big spread over by the Snagtooth, but it'll take him ten years to save enough to—well, I figger I kin git a job in town."

"It is robbery!" Milly Dilly suddenly let go. "Even the way the Busy Bee is, it is worth more. If that old goat is willing to pay five hundred for it when he could take it for taxes, he has something up his sleeve. Pa just won't fight. If he had some help, he could—"

"Couldn't pay for no help," Dilly said.

"Well, now," Butterball said. "Me an' my pardner have got to eat an' have a place to sleep when it rains, Ike. Maybe fer a while we could do just enough fer grub an' chawin' tobacco. A bee hive always has to have two drones, don't it?"

"Haw, that's a good one," Ike said. "You are hired, gents."

"We'll go to the bunkhouse, Ike," Butterball said. "The roof leak?"

"Only when it rains. Now sit down an' have some grub. Got it ready, Milly?"

AFTER a meager repast, the cowpokes turned their broncs loose in a corral and then explored the interior of the bunkhouse.

"In this corner it looks safe enough," the skinny man said and let loose a long sigh. "To think we come to such a awful pass, Butterball."

"Yep," the fat man said and lit a lantern that hung from a peg. "The appendix of nobility has been removed an' like the sin-buster said—Wonder who robbed that stage, Gabby. Say, I just remembered somethin'—" He took the letter he had found in the timber out of his pocket and slit it open.

"That's a state prison offense, you li'l gob of lamb fat." Gabby pointed out. "You leave it be an' take it to the rightful owner tomorrer."

"An' then confess to robbin' a stage. You are sure a smart hombre, Gabby. Was you kidnaped by Injuns when they handed out brains?" He removed a letter and held it up to the light. "It says here, Gabby: 'Dear Judge Spume, I shall arrive in New Galilee on Friday after the receep of this letter. I trust you have made the nec-nessery arrangements like purchasin' the Busy Bee ranch as that is where our valu'ble specimens grow thick.

" 'Get the ranch as cheap as you can and we will make a nice profit from same. You have had the pictures as drawn by one of my contemptuaries, so guess you could easily indentify the specimens an' have made no mistake—' "

"Don't make no sense, Butterball. Yet—"

"Shut up. To go on now, 'Extensive research on the part of my coll—colleges proves that the chinchiloola is invalu'ble to medical science. I am indebted to an old prospector who was once a friend of mine an' who I visited some years ago, because it was while I took a gold prospectin' trip with him I happened to see the speces.

" 'So when my colleges—well, I thought I'd contact the smartest man in the vicinity an' picked a judge who has to be smart an' could tell a species if I drew then in pencil. I trust we will meet soon and until then—your obedient servant—Homer S. Pennypacker, B.S., M.D., Ph.D.' "

"Huh?" Gabby said, scratching his head. B.S.—Ph.D. Bronc Sitter? Post Holes Dug? That language is too much fer me. Looks like a crooked deal somewheres, though."

"What day is it?" Butterball asked.

"Tomorrer is Friday," Gabby yawned.

"Yep? Figger I'll ask Ike fer a day off."

"We just start tomorrer, Butterball. Of all the gall I ever heard, you got—"

"This is Busy Bee business," Butterball said. "The train has to stop at the nearest railroad junction which must be not far from town. Look, I got to go up and talk to Ike."

"Go ahead. I'm tired," Gabby said and started pulling off his boots.

Two hours later Butterball woke Gabby out of a beautiful dream. A distant relative had just left him the Denver mint. Butterball pulled him back to a stark cruel world just as he was knee-deep in a bin scooping up golden eagles.

"I could kill you," Gabby growled and dug at his eyes with his knuckles.

"Look," Butterball said. "We want to be independent from work ag'in, huh? Awright, so I asked Ike who he thought the gent could be in Jawbone Junction who needed help so bad he'd ask us. Said it had to be Judge Spume's foreman out at the Rockin' T. The judge owns that ranch. So tomorrer we go to the Rockin' T an' apply fer jobs."

"You been eatin' loco weed," Gabby gulped. "That means harder work than we git here. I won't do it. I tell you I—"

"We kind quit any time, can't we? All's I want is to git the job of takin' Homer Pennypacker, B.S., etc., to town," Butterball said. "Don't figger the other cowpokes would relish the job an' two new hands would git stuck with it. We could tell Spume that Homer wa'n't on the train."

"Oh, Godfrey. But he will be on the train. The letter said—"

"Yep, but nobody can prove he arrived if he don't," the corpulent one explained. "We will abduct the hombre."

"Huh?"

"Here, let me explain," Butterball said, "so's even you could understand. Move over, Gabby—"

AT NINE o'clock the next morning Butterball Epps and Gabby Snead were on the payroll of the Rocking T. Most of the riders were out on the range and the foreman, Paint Wingle, rubbed his hands together as he welcomed the new hands to the fold.

"Got here just in time, boys. Got a li'l chore that has to be done an' nobody else—er—well, you look like two gents who could be perlite to what you got to pick up at Sagbrow Siding. A friend of the judge's. Name's Pennypacker. You take a spare bronc an' git to the siding about three this afternoon. Until then, you just sit aroun' an' git comfortable, yep."

"Our luck is holdin'," Butterball grinned when he followed Gabby into the Rocking T bunkhouse. "I figgered this would happen. We oughter be rich in about a week, huh?"

"It still scares me what you are figgerin' on doin'," Gabby said. "I still don't savvy most of it."

"Without me an' my brains," Butterball sighed, "you would never be out of work. Just leave it to me. . . ."

In the middle of the afternoon Butterball and Gabby arrived at Sagbrow Siding. The train had pulled out, leaving a lone citizen standing on the sun-warped plank of the siding. Butterball's bronc shied and Gabby had to keep a stiff rein on his black steed. "I didn't have a drink, Butterball, but look what I see! Tell me you see it too."

"I do. Ain't it a hell of a greetin', Homer? You are Homer Pennypacker, B.S., P. H. & D., ain't you?"

The learned man from the East was a hammered down little jasper with a wide-brimmed black derby that wobbled when he nodded his head. He had heavy-rimmed spectacles riding a big nose and he was clad in a swallow-tailed coat that scraped the trail behind him. His striped pants were tucked into heavy service boots that were curled up at the tips as if they had been drying in front of a fire too long.

"Ah, you are to bring me to the judge, I presume," Pennypacker said.

"Yep, toss us your warbag, perfesser."

"Warbag? I am a man of peace and—oh, my valise. Ha, I am not used to the quaint language of this rough country. I guess help is scarce too?"

"We hope," Gabby said and dismounted. He helped the hombre to the saddle of an old bronc that could see out of only one eye and had a case of equine asthma. "Just hang on to the saddle horn, perfesser. Let's go, Butterball."

They rode along a road for two miles, and then Butterball angled into a glorified cowpath that wiggled ever upward through a hodgepodge of wild topography.

"But," argued Pennypacker, "I'm sure we left the much better road. This seems foolish, gentlemen. I am not a hard creature and—"

"A short cut," Butterball said, his tongue in his cheek. "The bridge fell in up ahead there on the good road."

It was nearly sundown when the trio stumbled upon the remains of an old cabin nestling against the base of a high cliff.

"Better camp here," Butterball said. "We'd break all our legs an the broncs' travelin' by night. Git inside, perfesser."

"But—I am sure something is not quite—shall we say—er—who are you?"

"Suspicious li'l cuss, ain't he, Gabby?" Butterball sniffed. "Awright, we put our cards on the table. We are badmen an' will hold you fer ransom. We are lockin' you up here an' will leave you grub an' water."

"Release me this instant!" the little man said indignantly. "I—er—of course you won't. I'll give you a hundred dollars if—"

"Chicken feed," Butterball sniffed. "We are askin' half a million."

"I couldn't ever raise it," Homer squeaked. "I couldn't in that many years. Oh, have mercy. You must of had mothers. You wouldn't do such an evil deed thinkin' of her—"

"Oh, that does it," Gabby sniffed. "I'm weakenin', Butterball. Let's only make it half that much."

"It's a bargain," Butterball said. "Glad this is a heavy door here. Only one winder an' we can board that up. Just sit there an' not move, you li'l coyote. We are desperate men. When work stares us in the face we don't know what we'd do. Oh, you got a book in that valise, perfesser? I hope so as I neglected getting' some schoolin' until it was too late."

AN HOUR later Butterball and Gabby rode away from the old shack, the thump of Homer's fists against the door getting fainter and fainter as they ate up distance in the direction of the Rocking T.

"I sure can't wait to study this book I got, Gabby," Butterball said. "It's about bottomy."

"Sounds like it is about how to put new seats in worn-out pants," Gabby grinned.

Paint Wingle came running when they rode into the yard. "Fer cripes—where is the gent? You could have gone to Chicawgo to pick him up."

"Ha, ha," Butterball said. "Fooled us, huh? A initiation to the spread, huh? We didn't see no hombre like you described, Wingle. Waited fer three more trains an' then give up. Well, we ain't sore—"

The foreman scratched his head. "Huh, the gent must have changed his mind. Well, you two frowsy fiddlefoots will make up fer loafin' a whole day, I'll bet on that!"

"How much?" Gabby sniffed.

"Yep," Butterball said sourly. "Where'd you git the ears, Wingle? I bet you have to stake-rope yourself when the wind blows. An' where do you git the swill you serve hones' cowpokes? Look, we want to git somethin' settled. We git Wednesday an' Sunday off every week an'—"

"You're fired," the foreman howled.

"Now?" Butterball said. "You couldn't. We are destitute an' it looks like rain an' you wouldn't turn out—"

"I'll give you ten seconds to spin them broncs around an' pilgrim!" Wingle yelped.

"If that's the way he feels about it, come on, Gabby," Butterfield sneered. "I don't take that from nobody. We quit!"

Three hours later Butterball and Gabby were in Ike Dilly's dilapidated bunkhouse once more. Butterball had the book he had taken from Pennypacker open at a page covered with penciled notes.

"Here it is, Gabby. Say, ain't we seen weeds that look just like that? It says here—chinchiloola or asphyxium proboscum. Invaluable fer ailments of the pulpulmonary vesicles and as for the arytenoid cartilages an' the capillary—oh, Godfrey, who wrote this? This spread is filthy with that kind of weed, Gabby. Over back of the pumphouse it grows—"

"I begin to see," Gabby said. "All is not gold that glitters. The judge an' this perfesser will git the Busy Bee, pull up the plants an' make a medicine of it an' sell it to all the drugstores in the country. Chinchiloola. Well, I'm a—"

"I always said you was," Butterball grinned. "Now, tomorrer we will git a spade or somethin', a flock of feed bags an' really git to work."

They were up before dawn and laboring on the hillside behind the old Busy Bee pumphouse. Ike Dilly approached when they had ten feed bags filled with a yellowish green weed and he got inquisitive to the point of being insulting.

"What you think you're doin', huh? I got fences to be repaired an'—"

"Yep? How much you payin' us, Ike? Anyways, we found evidence that this is a poison weed an' if the cattle eat 'em, you won't even be able to use 'em fer steaks or pot roast. We'll plant corn here instead, Ike," Butterball said. "Say, who is that comin' over the hill, huh? Run, Gabby. Git them bags out of sight in the bushes. They ain't seen us yet. Go down an' stall 'em off, Ike."

"Diggin' weeds," Ike scoffed. "Of all the soft-brained—no wonder they work fer nothin'. Nobody'd hire 'em if—" He hurried down into the yard, and from concealment Butterball and Gabby saw the Busy Bee owner palavering with a tall hombre who even from that distance appeared to be more than somebody. They waited an hour before the visitors departed and then they hurried down to talk to Ike.

"The judge," Ike said. "Can't figger out why he's so anxious. Wants to finish the deal day after tomorrer. Won't wait, he said. You figger he's spotted gold on the Busy Bee?"

"You better sell, Ike. Me an' Gabby looked fer gold signs. There ain't none,"

Butterball said. "Let's git back to work, you skinny drone."

"Loco," Ike Dilly said, and hurried to the house to tell Milly. "Just humor 'em, daughter. Soon's I dare, I'll send fer the sheriff. Looks like they broke out of a crazy asylum somewheres. Don't leave the house without no six-gun, sabe?"

Twenty-four hours later Butterball and Gabby, bone weary from hard labor, dragged thirty more feed bags filled with the magic weed into a cache they had selected and sat down to convalesce.

"Nearly kilt me," Gabby choked out. "What next, giant brain?"

"We sneak into New Galilee an' drop a word here an' there about passin' by ol' cabin an' hearin' cries of distress," Butterball said. "Somebody'll investigate, like the sheriff. Then we git out of sight an' stay that way until the judge buys the Busy Bee. Then when Homer departs back East in low spirits an' with no profit, we kind of run into him on the way an' tell him about the chincherlooly weed. He'll forgive us an'—"

"If it works, I won't never figger nothin' can't be done hencefor'd an' hereafter, you li'l ball of suet. I still smell a jail."

GABBY and Butterball went into town and spread the word and then got into open country as fast as their broncs could negotiate the transition. They stopped at the Busy Bee for a few minutes and talked to Ike.

Butterball said hurriedly, "Look when you sell out tomorrer, don't say one word about what we did here, sabe? Or we will come back an' kill you an' your daughter an' burn the buildin's. We will foller you —that is wolfbane we collected. It keeps off vampires an' they are chastin' us, Ike. Listen, I hear one cryin' fer fresh blood now. Let's ride, pardner."

Two miles away, Gabby Snead eyed Butterball fearfully. "Uh, you was foolin' back there, huh? Work ain't drove you really crazy, li'l frien'? I—"

"Ha," Butterball said. "I'll even go crazy to insure against punchin' cows fer the next year an' a half. Of course I was actin'."

"Phew!" Gabby soughed out and pawed sweat from his brow. "I see now. Ike might've told the judge about what we did there an' so you put the fear of Tophet in him an'—but it still won't work."

"Bet you fifty dollars," Butterball snickered. Let's ride about six more miles an' camp somewheres. Tomorrer we'll sneak up to the Busy Bee an' see what we'll see, Gabby."

At noon of the next day the indolent cowpokes were sprawled out on the edge of a butte looking down at Ike Dilly's apology for a cattle ranch. There was a buckboard in the yard. Soon three men came out of the tacky ranch house and Butterball sucked in his breath and grabbed at Gabby's sleeve.

"The judge, Ike Dilly an' Homer Pennypacker! Looks like Spume owns the Busy Bee. Now we'll see what they'll do. Yep, there they go out back of the bunkhouse. Lookit Homer git down like a hound dog an'—what's he got in his hand?"

"Looks like a mirror on a stick, Butterball. It is one of them magnifyin' glasses, huh? The sun sparkles off it. Homer is up now an' shakin' his head."

They kept watching. Soon it was apparent that Homer Pennypacker, B.S., Ph. D., was in a violent altercation with Judge Nemo Spume. The judge slammed his big hat down on the ground, picked it up and rammed it over his bald head, then strode down to the ranch yard. He got into the buckboard and drove away. Homer Pennypacker tried vainly to catch up with the dust cloud that rolled out of the Busy Bee.

"Looks like we better go down an' grab Homer," Butterball said. "This is pannin' out better'n I expected. We can make the deal with the perfesser. Come on, Gabby."

Ike Dilly grabbed up an old shotgun when Gabby and Butterball opened the door and walked into the living room of the Busy Bee ranch house. Homer Pennypacker let out a frightened squeal and climbed to the big stone mantel of the fireplace.

"Stand back or I'll shoot!" Ike yelped. "Milly, run out the back door. You come to kill us all, huh? Well, I'll pertect my home until the last drop of—"

"Oh, put down the gun, Ike," Butterball said. "We come to—"

"To git me, Dilly," Homer screeched. "They want to abduct me again until I can raise a million dollars and maybe eat me. Don't let 'em—"

"Nope," Butterball said. "We come to see you awright, Homer. But only about sellin' you our supply of chinchiloola plant. Good fer pulmotary vessels to say nothin' of aridnoid cartridges an'—"

"Huh?"

"Yep, we got maybe forty bushels of the weeds," Gabby said. "We abducted you so's the judge couldn't swindle honest folks like Ike an' Milly Dilly. You wouldn't swindle 'em, would you, Homer? How much he give you fer the ranch, Ike?"

"Five hundred, like he promised," Ike gulped. "You ain't crazy?"

"We never proved we wa'n't," Butterball said. "But we could easy. We hate to work an' does that make us loco? Homer, how much will you pay fer forty bushels of chinchiloola leaves, huh?"

HOMER hit the floor with a bang, right on the seat of his pants. "Five thousand dollars, gentlemen. Show me the plant. I saw where a lot of plants was torn up, but the judge and me assumed the cattle ate it all. He says he will sue me."

"Five thousand for them weeds you pulled up?" Ike Dilly choked out and grabbed at his daughter and hung on.

"Yep, medicine in 'em," Butterball said. "Homer will tell you all about it. Look, they was on your property before you sold out, Ike. All's me an' my pardner wants is ten percent. That leaves you over four thousand dollars profit. You kin pay off the back taxes fer a song an' own the Busy Bee ag'in, because I would bet the whole five thousand the judge will try an' make you take it back."

"Oh, you darling, wonderful men," Milly said and rushed to Butterball and kissed him. Gabby also got his share, and it was not until ten minutes later that either cowpoke could talk lucidly.

Ike Dilly said, "An' you gents'll have work here long as you want it an'—"

"Now that is gratitude," Butterball said, "We save him from ruin an' he insults us."

"Why—er—I am sorry, gents," Ike said. "What did I say?"

"Fergit it," Gabby said. "You didn't know what you was sayin', Dilly. You got the cash, Homer?"

"Yes. It's sewed up in my coat, gentlemen. I was sure afraid you would rob me that time and—"

"Five thousand!" Gabby gulped. "Hold onto me, Butterball. He had five thousand dollars. If we'd known that we might've—would you have, Butterb—"

"Don't remind me what I would've done *if!* Let's show Homer where the chinchiloola is stored," the fat waddy said shakily. You got a big enough wagon to help him haul it to the depot, Ike?"

"Why, that is not necessary," Homer said. "We will keep it in a dry place and shrink it. When I see fit to return to my native city, the plants will fit right into one big bundle and will not be hard to carry. Quick, let me see the chinchiloola weed. It is a boon to mankind."

Later, with the weeds stored in the attic of the ranch house, the Dillys and Homer and Gabby and Butterball sat down to a celebrating repast. They were halfway through the meal when Homer Pennypacker thought of something.

"Oh, I must tell you, gentlemen. I gave the sheriff your descriptions, filed a charge of kidnaping against both of you. I told him you must have been the badmen who held up the stage. Oh, what have I done?"

"Plenty!" Butterball pushed through a mouthful of mashed turnips. "Come on, Gabby! You got the five hundred dollars? From now on, you are on your own, Ike. Oh-h-h, if that posse—"

"Adios," Ike yelled as the cowpokes rode hell-bent for somewhere out of the Busy Bee ranch yard.

Milly Dilly threw them kisses, but somebody else fired a shot. The posse was a mile away and coming fast. A winch snapped again and a twig flew from a branch over Gabby's head.

"F-Funny what two hombres'll do to keep from w-workin', ain't it, B-Butterball?" Gabby threw over at his pardner as he swung his bronc off the beaten path.

"Sure is, an' it is worth it, G-Gabby," Butterball came back. "I'm glad there is mountain-goat blood in these broncs. I wonder what B.S and Ph.D. really meant?"

"Save your breath," Gabby said. "Right now I am Gabby Snead, P.B. Posse bait. Think we can jump that canyon?"

They did. When night fell, they were safe from pursuit, holed up in a cave scooped out from under the roots of a giant tree by the floods of centuries.

"Good thing somebody works," Butterball said sleepily as he wrapped his blankets around him.

"Huh?"

"If Ma Nature didn't, we wouldn't have had this cozy wikiup for the night. Think of it, Gabby. It took her maybe eight hundred years to make it so's two no-account cowpokes who hate work could have lodgin' fer one night. The world is funny ain't it?"

Mystery of the Hidden Hoard

By Nat W. McKelvey

A true story of Giraffe Jones and his fabulous pay-dirt cache.

"IF I PASS out while the camp's still going," Giraffe Jones had said, "you guys are going to get one hell of a surprise."

One bleak morning in the Seventies, folks at Indian Gulch Camp, in the heart of California's gold belt, paused to wonder at those words. Old Giraffe Jones was as dead a jasper as he'd ever be. Lanky Pete Proder, whose claim was next to Giraffe's, found the old man sprawled on the dirt floor of his crumby cabin down on the creek bed. He was lying on his back, his long neck twisted sideways. His bulging nose and baseball Adam's apple made a sharp profile.

With deft fingers Pete Proder examined the body. He found no signs of violence. The bowlegged, bent-backed Jones had evidently died of a heart attack. Swiftly, Pete carried the news to Jack Lathers, owner of Ike's saloon.

"We'll have to bury him in boot hill," Jack said. "There ain't no other place soft enough to dig."

As far as anyone knew, Giraffe Jones had done no great wrong. But the Indian Gulch miners buried him in boot hill, alongside two murderers.

After the funeral, the miners gathered at Ike's saloon to toss off a few stiff ones in Giraffe's honor and to speculate on the mystery surrounding the dead man. Leaning on the slabwood bar, one foot set heavily on the cottonwood rail, short, bashful Ed Lang suddenly spoke up.

"Do you reckon Giraffe left any papers—like, mebbe, a will?"

IN THE mining camps of the old West, there was a seldom broken, unwritten law: "Thou shalt not ask a man's name, where he came from or why he came." Giraffe Jones asked nothing more of his neighbors than strict observance of this law, and he got it.

Giraffe was the first man at Indian Gulch. With his small placer claim, he founded the camp and became a sort of wise man to later arrivals. They used to watch affectionately as he shuffled out of his cabin each day, gangling along to his placer where he patiently panned out the yellow gold dust. Old Giraffe's pants were always worn through at the knees from resting them in the sharp gravel as he worked his pan.

He was a sort of godfather to the camp. Whenever anyone got sick, they yelled for Giraffe Jones. He knew desert herbs and the Indian secrets for making them into healing concoctions. He knew how to set broken limbs and he was, apparently, something of a natural psychologist, for he cured a failing youth of acute homesickness.

There were different stories of how he got his name. One said it was because of his long neck and bulging Adam's apple. A favorite version told how he had once lassoed a camel up on the Gila River and had mistakenly called it a giraffe. The best yarn says he actually did lasso a giraffe but had to let it go because he couldn't bend its neck sharply enough to throw it.

Giraffe never mined quartz, only placers. He liked to say: "Why pound up hard rock when all you got to do is wait ten thousand years and Nature will do it for you?" His belief was evidently sound. Everyone at Indian Gulch knew Giraffe Jones had gold—plenty of it.

Admiring the old fellow, the miners liked to say: "I hope he lives another hundred years." Now that he was dead, they openly declared the camp would never again be the same. Already they missed the old wizard and wished him

back. There were those, however, who most felt in Giraffe's passing the deepening of a mystery and the loss of their last chance to discover his true identity. Such was the gang gathered in Ike's saloon. . . .

Almost savagedly, Jack Lathers flashed an answer at Lang. "Hell, no," he swore, "the old coot probably never left no papers. Much less a will."

Lang, Joe Clutter, Pete Proder and Slim Cooke glanced up sharply as Lathers continued.

"You all know," the saloon man said, his keen eyes narrowing, "what we're thinkin' about. Poor old Giraffe's gone, but it's a cinch his gold ain't. Don't know as he had any relatives who could claim it. Any of you fellows know anything?" He paused, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Pete Proder's big feet shifted and he rasped his throat briskly before he spoke.

"You fellows know I palavered quite some with old Giraffe, but he never said much about hisself. There's only one thing he told me, and I can't make head or tail of it. It was right after the big rock slide when Ed here got all stove up. After Giraffe fixed him comfortable like, he dropped along to my claim and we had a smoke." Pete slowed for the effect and watched the intent, expectant faces around him.

"Go on," Lathers urged.

"Well," Pete continued, "when we finished that smoke, Giraffe said something damn funny. He said, 'I don't calculate I'll be with you boys long; but if I pass out while the camp's still going, you guys are sure going to get one hell of a surprise'!"

"Damn funny," Lathers agreed. "But that don't get us nowhere. Let's go down to the old coot's cabin."

GIRAFFE'S shack was a dejected dump with a burlap bag for a door. Lathers and Proder had to hairpin their lanky frames to get through the low opening. Because of the cramped quarters, the other men stayed outside, waiting with ill-concealed impatience.

Inside, Lathers prowled restlessly. There was a homemade bed of stick and one blanket. Giraffe's partly eaten breakfast was still on the rickety box that served as a table. A tipped-over cup of coffee and the battered coffee pot was still as the old man had left it when he crumpled to the floor, dead.

As Lathers poked about, his eyes fell on a faded brown bag, half concealed by a pile of old newspapers.

"Here's something, mebbe," he announced. His hands held an old knapsack, bulging. "Can't be much in here, though," the saloonkeeper continued, working at the clasps, "but you cain't never tell."

Proder and Lathers opened the bag outside in the presence of the other miners. A flurry of old envelopes spilled to the ground as the sack was tipped. Rough hands examined them.

"Shucks," Proder complained, "ain't nothin' but old envelopes addressed mostly to soljers at Fort Huachuca, Apache and Yuma. Let's get outa here, Jack. I don't hold much for riflin' a dead man's stuff."

"No, wait," Lathers said suddenly, his eyes brightening. "Here's one that says somethin'." He read aloud, his voice tensing excitedly as each sentence rolled out. The message said:

> I knew you fellows would pry into this old bag. I've seen every one of you eyeing it and wondering, and I've got something to say to all of you. Don't worry about my gold dust. I ain't got no folks to claim it. When you find it, it's yours, equal shares for all. I come from the north, and my next trip will be west from this sleeping place.
>
> Mebbe you fellows won't know where I am, then. You know it ain't no more than thirty steps from here to my placer ground. Maybe I'll still be hanging around there, mebbe not. Ain't sure myself. But the key to where my gold is hid is right in this here letter.

Faces glowed with avid excitement, and everyone started talking at once. Each had a different idea and all jaws were wagging noisily. That is, all jaws except Pete Proder's. He stood off a way from the rest, apparently lost in thought.

After a half hour of futile guessing, Jack Lathers sent the men down to his saloon for a nightcap and personally saw that they bedded down for the night in an upstairs room.

"We'll think better for a good night's sleep," he counseled.

But about four A.M., Pete Proder, who hadn't closed his eyes, leaped from bed,

yelling: "Hey, you guys! Tumble out! I've got it!"

In two minutes, half-dressed men spewed out from all directions, pulling on coats. Ed Lang, who slept in a red flannel nightshirt, was halfway downstairs before he got his pants on. He sort of pulled them up as he slithered down the stairs.

While the men tossed off an eye-opener, Pete Proder explained: "It was easy as finding cactus. I stayed awake all night thinking, and then it come to me. I ought to get an extra drink for this." He smiled slyly, then continued: "You remember Giraffe said he come from the north and his next trip would be west from his sleeping place? Meaning, of course, he was going to cash in his last stack of chips, like he just done.

"Well, if he come from the north, he was sure going south. He also give us the distance, when he said it was thirty paces to his placer. Here's the secret: go south thirty paces from his shack and then thirty west. I tried it, and it ends up at a big, flat stone. Let's go turn it over. Quick!"

Five pairs of hands heaved at the big stone, and it tipped over. In the hollow underneath, the men found three leather bags, heavy—as only gold dust is heavy. And there was a long letter on the backs and fronts of three envelopes. By the cold light of the morning star, just as dawn was breaking, Jack Lathers read it and gulped, "Well, I'll be damned." Then he gave it to the others, who read the document with bugging eyes.

To wit and notice: First of all, there ain't hardly no gold in my claim in the creek. Never was any. Best I ever done was fifty cents a day. The place where my poorhouse screenings come from is probably miles away. But that don't prove I ain't got gold. I got plenty, but it didn't come from around here.

Mebbe some of you fellows, especially Ed and Pete, remember when the stage was held up between Wickenburg and Prescott and a load of gold was took. Well, I done that job, singlehanded. Then I come down here and holed up until the trouble blowed over. I know Ed and Pete remember it because they had a year's diggings in that holdup. Their gold is in the two bags with their names on them. The other bag is for Jack Lathers.

The next paragraph thanked Lathers for having staked Giraffe in bygone days and for having kept secret his identity from the Indian Gulch bunch. The curious testament concluded:

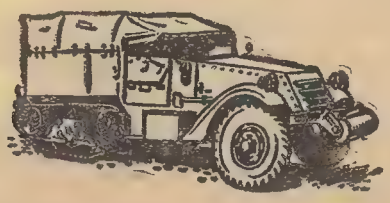
As for the rest of you boys, you can have what's left, even up. If you can find it. Underneath where my table set in the shack, you'll find a tin can. There's a map in it. Good luck.

Giraffe Jones—which ain't no name at all.

On the back of an old letter, Lathers and his gang found the map. It was heavily drawn with a dull pencil. On the bottom was scrawled: *Remember, I said the boys would be fools to shake Jack—he's been places. G. J.*

Sketched on the map was a stone house and a mountain range with a prominent peak. There was a rising sun, generally the symbol for buried gold or a lost mine. And, most strange, there were three U-shaped characters that might have been mule tracks.

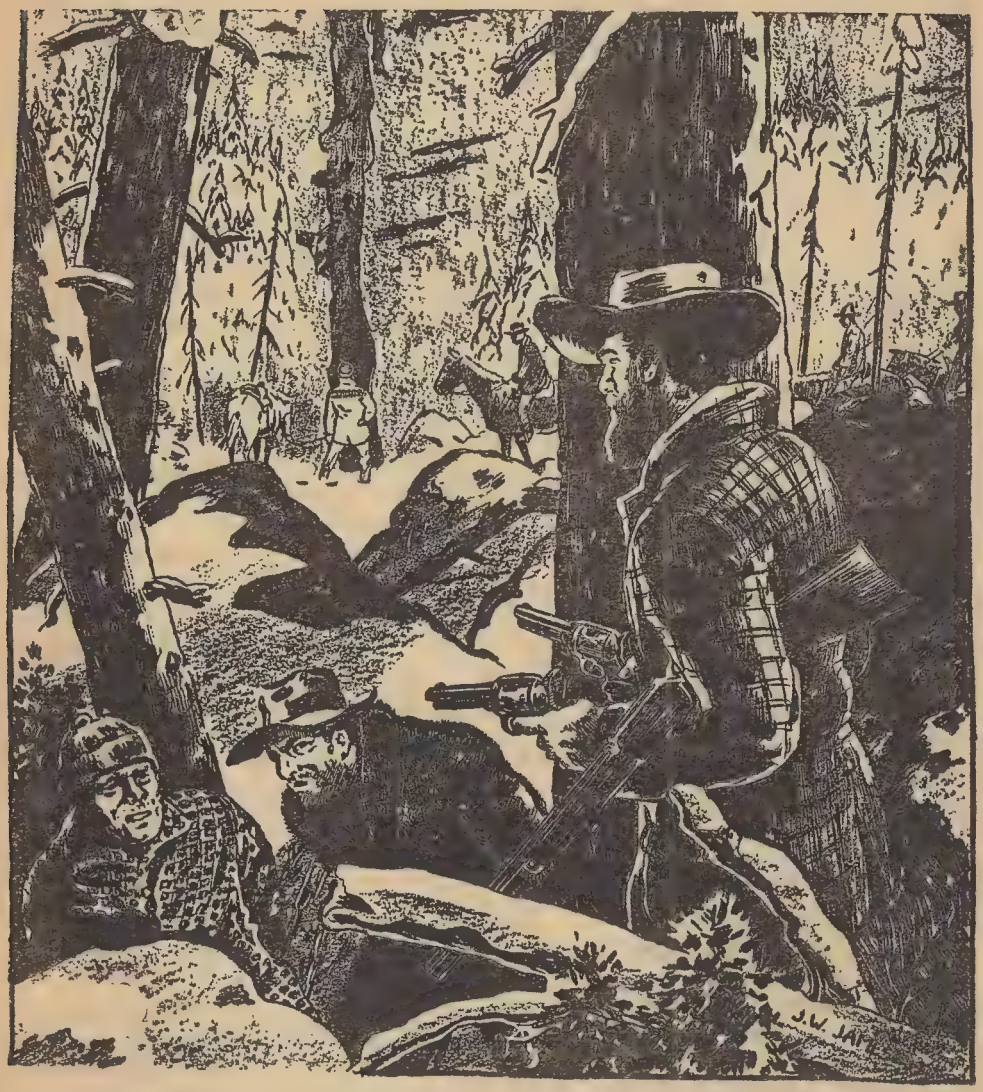
Jack Lathers, Pete Proder and the others searched for months. But Giraffe's buried hoard is as well hidden today as it was on that long ago day in Indian Gulch, when the old man was laid to rest in boot hill and the boys at Ike's saloon got "one hell of a surprise."



Here We Go To Tokyo!

Firebeard Rides to Brimstone

By Stuart Friedman



There were many legends of Firebeard Johnson's bravery, brawn, and bullet savvy. But none could compete with the .45 facts he had to face in a sidewinder setup.

THE morning was somber under heavy mist. It grayed the peaks, bathed fir, spruce and pine with dripping moisture. The distant bases of Mts. Lewis and Clark's twin snowcaps lowered daily. That lowering snowline was mute signal of the approaching snow that would lay a deep, still blanket over the high wild forest country north of the middle Salmon. But Firebeard Johnson ignored the occasional drenching

slap of a wet cedar bough, defied the gloom. As his and his wife's mule plodded down the timber road toward Kinnikinnick he sang:

Georgia and Virginia and Mary Land it's true,
Mrs. Sippi, Minna Sota and Miss Souri too,
Likewise Carolina and Della Ware we know
Have had their share of lovers—but I'll take Ida-ho!
Ho, ho, ho—yes—I'll take Idaho!

He carried the tune with all the grace of a bee-addled grizzly robbing a hive. His volume was like the thunder from the white racing waters of the Salmon soaring between its sheer granite walls. For he was a man of no mild moods, and he expressed joy as lustily as he denounced the devil. His world was good. There was dust aplenty in his pockets for the winter larder and for female foolishment to please Ella.

The tight-chinked peeled tamarack log cabin which he had built for his wife on Riffle Creek would make their winter snug. And with thaw he would work his claim again. His past had not followed him into Idaho Territory. His victory over the devil seemed final.

The timber road took the turn which brought Kinnikinnick into view. Ranged in the middle of the rutted street was a large group of men looking his way. Firebeard stopped singing. He caught at the fierce red whiskers on his chin, twisted absently, his bright blue eyes sharp with sudden apprehension.

"Stop making a thicket of your beard," Ella said, casting him a very unconvincing frown.

He grinned, his pleasure in the sight of her like a Chinook warming the quick chill of worry in him. His new wife was a little thing, pretty and frisky as a fawn.

"Do you see the audience?" he said. "I'd not thought my singing would bring men into the street."

"Why not? It's the solemn truth you've treed a cougar with your voice."

"I've not said it," Firebeard defended. "Men tell many a tale about me, most no more true than the one claiming that I gave chase to the devil across the Lava Beds and lost him only when he took to a cave."

"Where did you lose him, Gunnard?"

"For truth, I overtook and ate him," he said. "The fire in him colored my beard, for before that my whiskers were black as your heart, you imp."

FIREBEARD chuckled, returned his attention to the waiting men. Some were armed, he noted, and the uneasiness mounted. He had enemies, for he was a forthright man, without compromise. More, he was a living legend. When little was known of a man the stories grew. If the man was of striking appearance and with strange ways the stories spread far, and were apt to be repeated so often and in so many forms that the best of men came to believe their essence.

There were many versions of Firebeard's encounters with the devil. There were tales of his strength. It was said he had lost the horses of his teams, and pulled a loaded wagon all the way from Boise; that he had felled a moose with a fist blow; that he'd actually been scalped by a renegade tribe and lived to wipe out the whole band in a singlehanded battle.

Favorite lore had to do with his hate for whisky. From all of it, men concluded that Firebeard Johnson was either a disgraced ex-preacher or former boozer. It was true that he had spoken of the devil, who was intimately connected in his mind with hard drink. But he had never claimed he had seen, much less fought with an actual devil. Townspeople considered him a curiosity, some being amused, others awed or hostile. Being a legend wasn't productive of close friendships.

They were only yards from the assembled men now. The clop of their mules' hoofs resounding between building fronts was very loud against the unnatural silence which lay pall-like over the town. Firebeard's eyes were ice-blue as he saw the pale sober look of Ella's face.

"What—" she whispered. "What is it?"

The uneven line of men stretched from Aberrat's Saloon across the hoof-pocked, wagon-grooved street to Eee Yu's Laundry. Light glossed hazily on rifles, scatter guns and Colt six-guns. No one moved or spoke. An entranced audience of quiet men ranged along the raised plank walks on either side of the street. There wasn't a woman or kid to be seen.

Firebeard set his mouth, pulled in an angry breath through pinched nostrils. His face in the shadow of his dark broad-brim was dangerous as he reached for the reins of Ella's mount, halted both mules simultaneously. He swung to the road, glared toward the waiting line.

"Are you corpses risen from your graves or are you men?" he bellowed. "And if men, what the devil do you want? Speak out! I'm not apt to eat an unappetizing bunch like you. You, Charlie Aberrat, what has brought you away from your whisky barrels? Speak out, man!"

"We'll wait for your woman to pass," Charlie Aberrat said. "This is not a gentle affair."

Firebeard turned, caught Ella about

the waist and swung her down. "You go," he said. "This is going to take a little straightening out."

He gestured impatiently at her protests and ushered her across to the walk. The loungers fell back, leaving an aisle through which she moved to the other side of the armed line.

"Come across the street now," Aberrat said, coming up to Firebeard. "No tricks. We mean business."

Firebeard laughed uproariously. "Is that the closest you dare come—and with fifty guns to side you? Men, it's a brave saloonkeeper you have elected marshal. Brave as a tiger lily. Lead on, Aberrat."

SCOWLING, Charlie Aberrat hesitated a moment, then turned and strode toward the saloon. A large, dark man with a black beard as thick as Firebeard's, he had hated Firebeard from their first meeting a year ago. Firebeard had told Charlie he reminded him of the devil, after Charlie Aberrat had bragged that he never drank.

Inside, surrounded by the grim-faced armed men, Firebeard moved to the chair indicated for him at one of the square oak tables. He stood, bracing big hands on the chairback.

"I'll stand," he announced. "Get to your business and have done, for it smells foully here."

Aberrat faced him across the table. "You can't insult your way out of this, Johnson," he said. "The committee is for jailing you, but I've held out in favor of permitting you to pay for your damage, and to give you the chance to tell where you've hid the food."

"Well, now, and that sounds like you," Firebeard said. "You love me so well that you defend me. I'll pay for nothing and I'll reveal nothing till I know what lunacy you've brewed up."

Someone stirred among the crowd, pushed forward and stood by Aberrat. It was Ella's brother, a sour, weak man who hated Firebeard.

"Lunacy! You're the lunatic, you whisky-hating, devil-ranting hypocrite. And you're guilty of smashing a hundred barrels of whisky that was coming in by mule train. Well, we citizens will not let you go unpunished."

"Now, Brother Will, I've never heard you speak so harsh to me. But then, you're not often traveling with such a big pack," Firebeard said, grinning. "Nor have I known you to be so drunk in the early day. Knowing the power of whisky on weak men, I allow to forgive you. . . . Now, who else accuses me? What man will dare say he saw me smash a hundred barrels of whisky?"

"You weren't seen," Aberrat said sharply. "The mule train was attacked from ambush—about a mile from your stake on Riffle Creek, Johnson. A rifle was fired at the barrel, breaking many, and sending the animals stampeding to break the rest."

"Well, I did nothing of the sort," Firebeard said. "I had nothing to gain—"

"You hate whisky!" Ella's brother, Will Jackman, said. "Everybody knows that."

"Everybody knows," Firebeard said. "And that makes it mighty convenient for somebody. Tell me, Charlie, was any of your whisky in that load? Seems I recall you got your winter shipment last month."

"I did. My interest is the food chiefly. A band attacked the drivers and chased them off, and took over this town's winter supplies. With snow due any day there's not a chance getting another train in."

"That's a serious matter, I grant," Firebeard said. "I'd allow if any of you had a whit of brain you'd be out scouring the country to locate that food and not palavering with me."

HANS BERLE, who owned one of the two general stores spoke for the first time. "We are ready for that," he said. "It's why we're all assembled, Johnson. But this whisky angle points direct to you. Your cabin was to be our first call, but you came to us instead. This town faces starvation, and nothing will keep us from getting the truth."

"Maybe a rope around his neck would help his memory," Will Jackman said.

"It would stop my memory," Firebeard said slowly. "And that would be fine for someone. In truth, my memory is good just now, and I distinctly remember that I did not hear any of this gunshooting supposed to take place near my cabin. All that violence couldn't have gone unnoticed. So, someone lies."

"The remnants of the barrels are there as proof," Aberrat said. "And right here are the drivers of the train who were forced to flee, abandoning the food."

Firebeard frowned, regarded each of the half-dozen drivers as they came forward to have a look at him. They were a surly lot, unkempt and red-eyed from drinking, he could see. The last of the six stared at Firebeard longer than the rest. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then announced:

"They was masked. But this one looked mighty familiar. Big feller, dark clothes."

"That there red beard is his brand," Aberrat said. "He'd natural have it covered."

"Might of been a black one that was covered," Firebeard said.

"Might of, I grant."

From his pocket Aberrat took a large folded sheet of heavy paper. He lay it on the table, unfolded it unhurriedly. He smoothed it, beckoned the men around him to move closer.

"When I was down at North Sawtooth last month to buy in my whisky I parleyed some with the law folks. We come across this old poster. So I fetched it back with me. I been studying it." Aberrat paused and tapped a blunt forefinger at the photograph centering the *wanted* law poster. "I figure was a beard to be drawed on there the picture would be of Firebeard. Rest of the description fits." He looked up at Firebeard. "Was called James Jansen then, 'stead of Gunnard Johnson, wasn't you? And you never wore no beard."

Firebeard stared at the *Wanted for Murder*, eyes transfixed.

"Where'd you get it?" he blurted. "It's old. I stood my trial. I was freed!"

"Killed his own pap," Aberrat said calmly. "Been living amongst us under a alias—"

"Court allowed my changing the name," Firebeard said hoarsely. "Gunnard was my second name and Johnson that of my mother before marriage. I never killed my pap. It was an accident and the court freed me."

Aberrat looked at the crowd. "It says plain, don't it, *Wanted for Murder?*" he asked. "Will Jackman spoke his name perfect—hypocrite! Him and his holy ranting! I'm locking you up, then delivering you back to Texas where you're wanted—for hanging!"

"That poster is old! No longer in force, Aberrat," Firebeard roared. "Listen here, Charlie Aberrat, it never took you no month to figure out the likeness of me and that poster picture. You waited a-purpose to use it so's the food-train robbery would fall to me. . . ."

HER body rigid, her eyes accusing, Ella stood outside the cell door. "I believe you. The poster is old," she said in a flat voice. "I will stand by you, make them contact the Texas authorities to prove it."

"Do nothing," he said roughly. "If duty only prompts you, do nothing, Ella. In your heart you have deserted me."

Her voice was suddenly tense. She moved close, gripping the bars. "How dare you! Your every word of love has been a lie. You weren't a husband, or you would have told all this. You'd have had to share your past if you had had the proper love and trust."

"You are pride-hurt, Ella," he said gently. "I trusted you. But I was ashamed. For to have told all the truth would have meant revealing shameful facts about one now gone to his rest."

Her lips compressed. "I'll be going, then. You wanted tobacco and a newspaper, wasn't it?"

"Ella," he said urgently. His big hand closed fiercely around her on the bar. "Listen. I'd sooner bed with rattlesnakes than speak of this, but my father was a devil. He was a deacon, a prominent businessman with a holy face to the world. In private he drank, and the ugly, viciousness in him came out. And my mother—she—well, she bore the brunt of that black evil within him.

"The time came when she could not restrain me. I warned him—we fought. He was drunk. He ran outside, threatening to take an ax to me. I followed to stop him. In the toolshed, he somehow fell on a scythe. It killed him. I ran away—kept going. I knew no one would believe that he had been a solitary drinker, a brutal man. I didn't want to force the shame of admitting it on my mother.

"It was then the posters went up. Everywhere was my picture. Finally I went back—and was acquitted. But not in the public mind. The word spread, dogged my trail, forced me out of one town after another. They said it had been actual murder, but the jury, out of sorrow for my mother acquitted me." He stopped abruptly. "Ella—don't you cry! Hear me! I swore I'd never make my woman cry!"

"I'm not crying," she said, wiping her eyes. "I'm—I'm just nervous."

He grinned, reached through and put his hand against her face, briefly. He withdrew it, half shamedly. "Guess you know why I'm 'touched' on the whisky subject, and the devil it puts in men's hearts."

"But, Gunnard, you've known good men who drank."

She turned as the door of the office half of the jail building opened. Her brother Will Jackman came in, letting in a chilling draft. The gray day had grown steadily colder, with snow imminent.

"DEPUTY!" Will announced loudly, looking toward the cell. "The food train has been located in Split Rock Canyon. As you know, the opening is very narrow and almost impossible to storm. Two guns could hold off an army through that pass. The gang guarding it has offered to deal with the people of Kinnikinnick."

"Good!" Ella exclaimed "Oh, Will, I'm so relieved."

"They want exactly ten times what the food is worth," Will said harshly. "And they want more than that. They demand the release of their leader! Mr. Firebeard Johnson!"

"Gunnard!" Ella cried. "It's not true!"

"No!" Firebeard said. "Will, where'd you get such word?"

"Aberrat," Will Jackman said. "Here's his note authorizing Firebeard's release," he added to the deputy. "I was with him and the six mule skinners that got robbed of their train. We was searchin' that territory. Bandits called out for Aberrat to come into the canyon there to talk business. He sent me back with word."

"Why, them polecats. I never seen them, leave alone be their leader. Why'd they try to mix me up in this?" Firebeard said furiously. "Just no reason! What they got again' me? Just what they say, Will?"

"I never talked with them," Will said peevishly. "Why don't you quit blowing wind, and 'fess up like a man? Elly, he's a killer and thief."

"But no gabble-mouth dummy, running errands for them as despises me like Aberrat does you. Why, he's fleeced you! Used you for his monkey," Firebeard scorned. "He hates me, and for truth he's made up the whole tale. You never heard with your own ears that I was their leader, did you?"

"I was a piece behind when they called him into Split Rock Canyon," Will said hotly. "I'd lost my footing where some of that spilt whisky busted and iced up. Aberrat was conferring inside when I caught up—"

"Whisky iced up! Whisky iced up in this short a cold spell?" Firebeard roared. "Blue blazes, man, you knew better than that. Why, it's clear as cave ice what's happened. Aberrat's behind it all. He stole that whisky that was coming to the other saloons, and him and his gang mashed up some barrels filled with water.

"Then he goes on to steal the food. What's more I don't think there *is* any gang but what we already seen. Namely them so-called mule skinners that claimed to of been robbed. Only why with it happening a couple miles from my stake didn't I hear the shootin'? Why wasn't none of that six shot up none at all? On account it didn't happen!"

"But he went in Split Rock Canyon to talk to them, then come out with their terms and sent me," Will persisted.

"Did you go in the canyon? Did you see any such people?" Ella demanded. "Certainly not! Will, don't you be dumb. Unless you're in with Aberrat. . . ."

"I ain't no crook, Elly!" Will said. "Maybe I was fooled."

"You was, Will," Firebeard said earnestly as the deputy unlocked the cell. "When he was down to North Sawtooth last month he planned it all—carefully so as he could make a gob of money and me take the blame. Them skinners was in on the plan with him. And they'll make a fight for it. We got to get men together."

"Most are still out hunting the cache, but they're due back to meet in town. Aberrat sent out the signal that the cache was found and all was to return to Kinnikinnick," Will said. "To raise the money—"

"There's Charlie Aberrat riding down from the timber road now," Ella called. The three moved to the door and outside into the first snowfall of the season.

THEY hadn't gone a dozen steps when Aberrat yelled:

"There's Firebeard Johnson! Round him up! I'll tell you what his deal is, fellow citizens, and then leave it to you what to do with him!"

Firebeard said in low tense tones, "Get away. There's men who'll believe the truth. Find them and get them up to out cabin—with arms. I can handle it till then."

He strode into the middle of the street, head back, the snow flaking his dense beard. "I'm here, fellow citizens, ready to talk terms! Lay a hand on me and my men smash and burn every ounce of provision. You can't track cows through a bog, much less hunt for food game. So deal or starve the winter out!"

Firebeard strode up to Aberrat's horse and roared, "You got three hours to get up there with that money!" In a lower voice he said, "You can play it rough if you want. Charge into that canyon and capture them imaginary thieves, or kill 'em off, or throw 'em over into the Salmon—but that way you wouldn't make a penny off it. This way, I'll play along for a fifty per cent cut."

Aberrat said through his teeth, "We're going to pay off to you and your gang. And I'm going to see that all of you escape, and then I'll trail you and bring back your head—only your gang will have got off with the money." He dismounted, shouted to the gathering crowd, "We can't touch him—not now, men. We'll have to play his game awhile, and pay—"

"A fine horse," Firebeard said, swinging into the saddle of Aberrat's mount.

"I reckon you're smart," Aberrat said in low, tense tones. "I reckon in three hours you'll be the hell out of these parts. Ever come back, sticking your nose in my business, and you guess how quick we string you!"

"I can guess, friend Charlie!"

He set out fast in the settling dusk. Snow was beginning to stick to the high evergreens, to lay a sound-muffling cover on the quiet woods. The crisp tang of new snow mingled with the redolence of balsam and fir. Firebeard's mind was sharp as the air that filled his lungs. Ice had already edged Riffle Creek as he reached his cabin. He had scarcely dismounted when running hoofs resounded hollowly among the silent forest giants.

Firebeard moved inside, swiftly took down and loaded his Winchester, thrusting handfuls of extra shells in his pockets. He leaned against the fragrant flat sawed log wall, watched at an angle through the window. In a moment the horse came from the mouth of the path into the clearing. It took him a moment to recognize Will Jackman through the dense, floating snow.

"Firebeard, he sent warning!" Will shouted. "If you're around when they reach the canyon, Ella will get an accidental bullet in the head. It'll be dark then. He plans to fool the whole town like he done me. Plans to send them mule skinners in to tote out the food, pretending your gang's in command, and the pass is guarded."

"Couldn't you round up no help?"

"The deputy knowed what we was up to, Firebeard, and he told Aberrat. I'm scared for her. You got to promise to clear out, hear?"

"I'm through clearing out of places," Firebeard said hotly. "You get back there, Will Jackman, and see nothing happens to that girl. Why, he won't dare harm her. He's bluffing you. Get her over to one of the preacher's houses. I'm heading for Split Rock Canyon!"

IT WAS dark, the air snow-choked. He went the last hundred yards afoot, found the small opening in the sheer, mountain-high granite formation. No one was outside. He entered the black mouth, so narrow he could touch either side with outstretched arms.

He knew the canyon sloped down, the sides spreading in a V which opened onto a torrential section of the Salmon. The river was narrow, impassable by boat there, and the opposite bank was a two thousand foot high wall of granite. A perfect hideout. He moved twenty steps inside, listening intently, scarcely breathing. In the narrow pass no snow filtered down, but now and then slaty chips, dislodged by changing temperature, ricocheted down from wall to wall.

The sound echoed weirdly in the still depth, but it was soon drowned. For as he went farther he could hear the roar of the river. It was louder than he ever remembered, in that snow-heavy air, and resounding through the hollow formed by steep bare walls.

His body flexed suddenly. He'd come near the pass outlet, and the snow caught up a misty orange light from a campfire somewhere inside. It was enough light to outline the figure which had moved into the pass, and now came toward him.

Firebeard backed against the rough, cold granite, leaned his rifle, and knotted his huge fists. He waited, ready to strike. The man stopped abruptly. He started to turn. Firebeard struck, just in time to check the yell of warning. The man crumpled.

He took the fallen man's pistol, retrieved his rifle, moved to the mouth of the pass. To the left, strung along the wall were tethered mules and provisions. Seated around a campfire on the right were the other five skinners, drinking coffee. Firebeard thrust the pistol in his pants band, took a bead with the rifle. The shot cracked. A coffee cup clanged, leaped out of the hand of one of the drinkers.

"Git to your feet, hands high! That was a sample of my shooting. Move easy-like!" The stunned men rose slowly, hands lifted. "Now, face away, throw your guns down. You on the left," he said tersely, when the guns had been tossed to the ground, "get a pack rope and fetch it here."

Firebeard shifted to the pistol, as it was handier. He opened a pocketknife, took the rope that one of the men brought.

"What's the idee, Red?"

"If you don't want to pick bullets outa your teeth, shut your mouth, and turn around."

Firebeard worked swiftly, cutting the rope in lengths. Then he tied the nearest man's wrists tightly behind him, put a handkerchief gag in his mouth. One by one he summoned the others, repeated the operation. Finally all, including the fallen man, were disposed of. Swiftly, he scanned the length of the canyon, and could see no safe hiding place. He went to the fire, picked up all their guns.

"Now march into the pass. We move slow. Any running or commotion and the guns start firing," Firebeard said. "I'd as lief kill you as not. All I'm interested in is having you out of the way and quiet."

He moved after them, two pistols ready, rifle under arm, the other guns in pockets and under his belt. He realized the tying job had taken a dangerously long time. Aberrat and the rest from town would be coming any minute. The drone of the river died away as they went through the deep, black chasm. And then

as they reached the opening there was the unmistakable sound of many horses, sending out a crackling noise as they came over ground brush.

FIREBEARD and his captives came into the open. He prodded them sharply with gun barrels, sent them hurrying away from the mouth of the pass, their figures barely visible against the dim white of the snow. He herded them into a small stand of cedar a hundred yards from the pass, forced them to lie down. He stood watching as the men from Kinnikinnick drew up to the pass.

"This is Aberrat. I'm coming in with the money, men!" Firebeard heard. He waited till Aberrat dismounted, said to his captives, "Don't follow, or I shoot!"

He strode determinedly to the waiting band of twenty or thirty mounted townsmen. Aberrat had had time to reach the other end of the pass.

"Firebeard Johnson, men! My wife here?"

"No," Will called. "She's safe. And I told these folks about that whisky freezing."

"Then just hold on," Firebeard said. "Don't tell Aberrat I'm here, and he'll prove to you he's the thief. He's got the money, hasn't he?"

"Yes," someone said. "Only, we're still watching you, Johnson."

Firebeard took concealment beyond the horses, waited. It was a long agonizing wait. Gunfire sounded suddenly from inside the canyon, echoing hollowly through the pass. Firebeard swore, wondered what had gone wrong. The shots came rapidly, one after another. The men began to exclaim in excitement. Several dismounted, headed for the pass. Then Aberrat came out at a run, panting.

"I couldn't stop 'em. I fired—and they nicked me once, here on the arm. But they got away. Had a big log raft on the river. See, they knocked me down and ran—look where I'm bruised. I tried—tried to save our money. But the food's there. Safe. We'll get it tomorrow."

Firebeard came at him silently, sent a scornful bellow of laughter into the air. "Quick thinking," he said. "Come back tomorrow, eh? So you'll have time to sneak the dough out? I knew you'd pull a fake fight, but never thought you'd give it all the trimmings with guns and all—even shot the skin off your arm." Firebeard turned. "Ain't nobody in there, and there never was, except his mule-skinner buddies. Search around and you'll find that money that they got away with, says he!"

Aberrat's gun exploded. Firebeard returned fire with lightning speed. He sent a second bullet. It smashed into Aberrat, whirled him half around. His arm flew up, then went limp, twisted under him as he fell. He lay motionless, his blood making a crawling dark semicircle in the snow.

"He fired on you, Firebeard," someone called, breaking the silence. "You're in the right."

"Good riddance," Will called. "Here, brother, you oughta take a drink on it!"

Firebeard took in a long breath, then laughed shakily. "I've not changed my ways," he said. "But—you see, the first devil I ever knew was a drinking man, and even when he was gone he dogged my life. Now, this here devil has been dogging my life. And he never drank a drop. So what's a man to think?" He flicked the gathering snow from his beard, added, "Maybe the devil himself can't figure where he stands."

Lightning Avenger

By Roger Rhodes

When Glen Swick fashioned that death snare, he didn't savvy that it would trap a two-legged lobo.

LIGHTNING flashed across the boiling jet-black sky. It licked through the night with a thousand fiery tongues, gutting the darkness with flickering light. A clap of thunder rolled across the heavens, sounded like a rock slide loosed on the black slopes of Powder Mountain, in the distance. And Glen Swick, the ex-outlaw, knew the first electric storm of the season had exploded in all its fury. Now was a chance to kill his partner!

He turned back into the neat little cabin that he and Bill Elkert owned. His dark eyes glittered when he looked at the crippled old man over there on the bunk. And he told himself that it wouldn't be long now before he owned the profitable little spread in which the old-timer had sold him a half-interest. Bill wanted him to settle down and be a decent man. He laughed.

Bill Elkert had no living kin. There would be no troublesome heirs, coming with their lawyers to put in their claims against the place. All Glen Swick had to do was to fool Sheriff Cal Pool, and the lightning storm tomorrow night would do that for him.

Why, he told himself, he could be in town talking with the sheriff when the lightning struck. Nobody could ever tag him with the crime.

He gave the cowman a wolfish grin.

"I'd better put up them lightnin'-rod fixtures you bought for the place, Bill," Swick said. "Once these blamed electric storms start, they usually hit a country for a month or more, comin' every night."

His voice was dry, hard, casual. He had to grin at the finality in his own statement. Lightning would flash across the heavens tomorrow night, all right. It never missed, once the storm started. And Bill Elkert would be blown to smithereens when it flashed.

Bill Elkert lifted his grizzly head from the pillow. There was a pleased smile brightening his lined face when he looked at the younger man.

"Glen, you're a mighty fine pardner," he declared. "Doin' most the work around here and not complainin'. I'd help put up them rods in the mornin', but this lumbago is givin' me plain hell. I'd likely fall off the house and bust my fool neck. It's mighty nice, havin' a young pard around."

There was simple trust and appreciation in the cowman's gentle voice. He liked Glen Swick, because he felt like a sort of guardian for the wild young hellion. He wanted Swick to make good in the world. He'd told him so.

Swick sat down on his own bunk. He looked over at the oldster, and his dark eyes were bright with a killer gleam that the cowman failed to see.

"This six-months' partnership has done a lot for me, Bill," he admitted. "It's showed me the right way to go—with no sheriff on my backtrail. It will be worth a lot more to me, too."

The cowman nodded. "I'm mighty glad it straightened you up, son," he drawled. "The way you'd started out, you'd of throwed your whole life away in a penitentiary some day. But, once folks git confidence in you around here, you'll amount to somethin'. You'll have to work

hard and grow slow. But you'll grow, son."

"You bet I will!" Swick agreed.

But it wouldn't be the slow way, he promised himself. He would grow, and grow fast; when lightning struck tomorrow night, he would own a cow outfit!

BILL ELKERT, disregarding his lumbago, rode off for the south pasture right after breakfast next morning. Glen Swick watched him go, and a cruel, hard smile played around his traplike mouth.

Swick went down to the tool shed below the pole corrals where Bill Elkert kept his blasting powder. He found ten kegs there, powder the old man used to blast out rock to fill in chug holes in the road every summer.

Swick took four kegs of powder, two at a trip. Then he dug a shallow hole under each corner of the ranch house. That took work, and he didn't like to sweat. But he would be paid well for this labor, he reasoned.

In the bottom of each of the four holes, he drove a short length of lightning rod deep into the ground, leaving only a six-inch peg above the surface. He smashed a keg of blasting powder down on each of those four iron pegs, and he ran the ends of longer rods into each keg from the top.

To each corner of the house, he ran those longer ground rods up to the roof. Then he carefully covered over with earth each of those powder kegs. The ends of those rods, with their ends almost touching, would form spark gaps right smack in the middle of each keg of powder. A hard smile flicked Swick's face when he thought of that. Lightning would do its job!

An hour later, he was up on the roof, stringing rods along the housetop, with shiny new spearlike aerials jutting up every ten feet or so to attract the lightning and send it flashing along the conductors to the ground below—right into those powder kegs!

It was almost sundown when Swick finished his work. He stood on the sloping roof, admiring his death trap. Men put lightning rods on their homes for protection against the elements. Who would ever suspect a gent would turn such a protective device into a murder trap?

Swick looked over toward a big cottonwood grove, about a mile away. Bob Davis over there would hear the explosion when lightning flashed across the sky tonight. He would look out and see the house burning. He would swear lightning had struck the place. The sheriff would be convinced. Because Glen Swick would be in town, perhaps talking to the lawman himself. And the bleached bones of Bill Elkert, in a pile of ashes out here, would never tell the story! But Swick felt nervous, shaky. He trembled.

Hoofbeats sounded in the yard below, startling Swick. He jerked around.

"It shorely looks mighty fine, son—that job you've done!"

Swick's left foot slipped on the slanting roof. Blood froze in his veins. Fear gripped him. His right ankle twisted over. He was falling.

He grabbed at one of those upright aerials, but his reaching hands missed by inches. He felt himself hurtling down the slanting roof.

He clawed at shingles. But he hurtled on down, spinning, sliding.

Where the eaves dipped off into a twenty-foot drop, Glen Swick paused in his sliding fall for a fleeting instant. He caught a glimpse of Bill Elkert down there on his horse. But there was nothing for Swick's clawing hand to grab hold of. He hurtled on over the eaves, falling.

A scream slipped from him in mid-air.

He struck solidly against hard-pan ground on hands and knees. He heard bone snap in arms and legs. Terrific pain lanced through him. He sprawled there, helpless, fighting off darkness that closed in on him.

Through glazed eyes, he saw Bill Elkert bending over him, concern and sympathy on that craggy old face.

"Dang it, son, I got to take you right to a doctor!"

Those kind words lanced through Glen Swick's mind and made him scream out with quick anguish. He couldn't let his plans fall through now!

"No—no!" he cried. "Not that, Bill! Wait, let me think!"

If Bill Elkert wasn't here tonight when lightning flashed across the sky, the death trap would explode and it wouldn't kill him! All of Swick's plans would fail. Elkert had to be here when the lightning flashed!

"Pore boy is plumb out of his head!" Bill Elkert muttered sympathetically.

Glen Swick felt the darkness of unconsciousness closing in on him. He couldn't fight it off. It swept him in, blotting out his understanding.

GLEN SWICK opened dull eyes against yellowish lamplight. The dull pain that racked his body failed to flash his mind back to full awareness of his situation for a full sixty seconds. He found himself lying on his own bunk, and he

looked across and saw that Bill Elkert was not in bed.

Then he saw the note pinned to his own chest. His mind began to click when he read that. Horror gripped him, as he read aloud:

Son, you're all broke up and jest too blamed fragile for me to tote into town. I'm plumb sorry to leave you here by your lonesome. But Bob Davis and his folks ain't home. And I've got to go git the doctor for you. I'll shore be back with him by midnight.

Bill

Midnight! Good Lord! Was it night already?

The worst of Glen Swick's fears were realized when he looked through a window and saw darkness outside. He heard the wind rising, too. He saw a faint streak of lightning flash across an oily sky.

A scream slipped from Glen Swick. He tried to get out of bed, but both arms and legs were broken. He dropped back against the pillows and a terrific moan of anguish slipped from him.

He heard the storm when it boiled down off the black slope of Powder Mountain. Zigzag streaks of lightning lanced across the heavens. If one strong bolt licked down from the blue and was attracted by those lightning-rod aerials on the house, it would touch off those kegs of powder!

Houses equipped with lightning rods didn't often get struck. The rods formed conductors that sent the electricity into the ground. But Glen Swick thought of those spark gaps he had made in the powder kegs under the house. He felt like a rat in a murder trap.

Swick cringed from a lightning bolt that lashed across the sky outside. He saw it flash along a barbed-wire fence, twisting like a fiery snake, licking at everything in its path. Darkness perished in the clearing and a million zigzag streaks flickered across the heavens, when the storm cut loose with full force and a vengeful fury.

A blinding flash speared down like a streak of flame. It darted like a living thing around the house hulked low in the clearing, brightening the night like day.

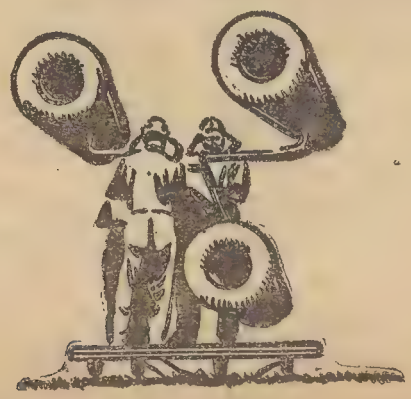
A second bolt lashed down, to thunder against the first one, as though to lend it force and push it on through those rod conductors, down to the spark gaps in the grounded powder kegs. Blue flame darted, sputtered, and exploded in the air, when those two lightning bolts clashed together.

Somehow, Swick flung himself from bed, disregarding the helplessness of his broken limbs. He rolled toward the door, his horrified scream lifting through the storm.

Thunder rumbled in the heavens, but above the thunder an explosion crashed through the night. It burst in a crimson blaze, lighting up the pole corral and outbuildings. The ranch house swelled and lifted in the air. It shattered into a thousand bits of debris. Glen Swick's scream of horror chopped off in the middle, muffled by that terrific blast of black powder. . . .

Clear and bright, stars and moon showed early-morning dew on the grass, and embers were red against the background of ruins. Old Bill Elkert and the doctor he had brought from town looked down from their horses.

"Pore boy," Bill Elkert said. "That lightnin' shore struck hard!"



Your Country Is Still at War . . . . Are You?

The sheriff thought he was a mighty good judge of horseflesh—until that redheaded button showed him a thing or two about . . .

Masked Hoofs

By Barry Gardner

SOMETIMES bein' a sheriff is pretty hard. You get took advantage of, and sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do. You take this Smoky Hoff button. . . .

I saw him when he rode into town. I recognized him right off, because I'd got a letter from Sheriff Conant over in the next county just a few days ago tellin' what this Smoky Hoff had done. I knew it was my plain duty to arrest Smoky and hold him until Sheriff Conant arrived.

From a window of my office I watched him ride along the street. He was a blocky, red-haired, freckled button, not over eighteen. He was dressed in dusty, faded old clothes. But I didn't pay much attention to the kid—it was the horse he was ridin' that caught my eye. It was a big, powerful, long-legged black gelding. I could tell right quick the big black was a thoroughbred.

Smoky Hoff was comin' along slow, but you could see ginger and pride in the black's arched neck and in the way it pranced. I knew right quick I wanted to own that animal. If I'd had it, instead of my own crowbait, the last time Cherokee Ralls had rode out of town two jumps ahead of me, Cherokee never would have got away.

That was somethin' else. Cherokee Ralls was somewhere close; he'd been seen a couple of times lately. Cherokee was a bad one—he was wanted for just about every crime on the books. He was slick, too. He always struck suddenly, and rode away fast, getting into the

hills where he had several hideouts. It was about time for him to strike again, and I figured that was why he'd been snoopin' about lately, gettin' the lay of the land. It had me worried.

I watched Smoky Hoff as he rode along the street and stopped at a rack before the Texas House Saloon. He dismounted, tied the black, then started foolin' with a stirrup leather. But I could see he was watchin' the street. I saw him look hard toward the sheriff's office and I figured he was uneasy.

Lee Tolley, who owns a ranch over west of town, walked up and said something to the button. Then several others came up. They circled the black, proddin', feelin', shaking their heads. I saw I wasn't the only one that wanted that gelding.

I got up, went out and along the street toward the Texas House. As I came up, I heard Lee Tolley say, "I need a horse like that, kid. I'll give you two hundred for him."

SMOKY HOFF smiled and shook his head. "I don't want to sell Nero. But if I did it'd take more'n that to get him. That hoss is blooded stock. He's got speed."

"Three hundred, then," Tolley said quick.

"Nope." Smoky scuffed his boot toe in the dust. "I need money, all right. If you was willin' to—"

"Kid," I said, cuttin' him off, "I'm Sheriff Sam Gunnels."

He nodded, lookin' kind of pale. "Glad to know you, sheriff. Well, I reckon I better be ridin'. I got some business over east a piece."

I said, "What's your hurry? That's a fine lookin' animal you got there."

"Ain't as good as he looks. I don't want to sell 'im."

"I heard you say you needed money. What's your bottom price for him?"

Smoky said stubbornly, "He ain't for sale, sheriff." I could see he wanted to get out of town.

"Kid," I said, my hand on his shoulder, "you come over to the office with me. I want to talk to you."

He swallowed hard and he looked paler that ever, but he didn't try to get away. He nodded, and we started back along the street. I said over my shoulder:

"You gents can forget about that animal. You heard the kid say he ain't for sale."

We went into my office, and I told the button to sit down. You could tell he figured he was in a jam.

I asked suddenly, "Smoky, where'd you steal that horse?"

"I didn't steal him! I got the papers here to prove I didn't." And he took some papers out of his pocket and handed them to me.

The papers looked okay. They proved the black gelding belonged to Smoky Hoff.

"All right," I said. "What'd you say your bottom price was?"

Smoky repeated stubbornly, "He ain't for sale."

"You sure of that?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Not to you, sheriff, anyway. And if that's all you wanted, reckon I'll be ridin'."

"You set still a spell, kid," I said. I rummaged in a desk drawer and found the letter I'd got from Sheriff Conant a few days before. "This here letter's from Sheriff Conant over at Jubilee. It mentions you. It says you pulled a pretty fast one over there a couple of weeks ago."

"Who, me?" Smoky says. "You must have the wrong man."

"No, I ain't," I said. "It says you sold a bunch of horses to a gent named Ed Tarrant. It says you claimed these horses was first class, but a couple of days after Tarrant bought and paid for 'em he found out they wasn't worth a dime a dozen. They'd been 'painted.' They looked good, but when they went faster'n a trot they just sort of wilted. It made this Ed Tarrant pretty sore, bein' bamboozled like that. You deny you done that?"

"Just part of it," Smoky said slowly. "I sold Tarrant some horses, all right. But I didn't claim they was any good. I didn't say they was and I didn't say they wasn't. Ed Tarrant is a horse rancher—he's supposed to know horses. It was his own fault if he got rooked."

"Mebbyso. Anyway, Tarrant wants you arrested and jailed."

"The dirty skunk! If I'd stole that money from him, instead of gettin' it as pay for horses, Ed Tarrant'd still owe me a lot of money."

"How you figure that?"

"We had a little outfit—me and Pa—joining Tarrant's Coffin spread. That was several years ago. Tarrant started crowd-

in' us. He stole us blind. I can't prove that, but I know it's so. It got so bad Pa had to go to the bank for a loan. Tarrant somehow got the note and mortgage from the bank. Then he stole a lot more from us, so that when the note fell due Pa couldn't pay. Tarrant took our outfit. It killed Pa—he just kind of faded away and finally died."

I KNEW Smoky Hoff was tellin' the truth. I'd heard about Ed Tarrant. But I still wanted the black. I figured a broke kid like Smoky Hoff didn't have any business with a horse like that.

"I been on my own since Pa died," Smoky went on. "I had a pretty hard time—not that I'm kickin'. But I figured that when I sold Ed Tarrant them doctored broomtails I was just gettin' back a little of what he owed me. But if the law figures different, then I'm ready to be jailed."

I was quiet for a while, lookin' out the window. The crowd had finally drifted away from the black down there before the Texas House. It was midafternoon, and hot, and the town was mighty still and quiet.

"I aim to treat you white, kid," I said. "I know Ed Tarrant's a crooked skunk. I'd like to see him skinned every day. Sheriff Conant's my friend and I know he feels the same way. I could just sort of refuse to turn you over to him. I'll do it, too—if you'll sell me that black. I'll give you a good price for him—four hundred dollars."

Smoky Hoff's jaw set stubbornly again. He said earnestly, "I'd like to do it, sheriff, I sure would. But that animal ain't for sale at no price. He—I've kind of got attached to him. You can't have him."

That made me sore. "You'll get kind of attached to a cell, too, before you get out!" I hollered. "I'll—"

I didn't say anything else, for just then a gunshot blasted the quietness wide open. It came from down the street, toward the bank. I looked out the window, and I saw a man back from the bank doorway and onto the plank walk—a tall, dark, hook-nosed gent. This man had a smokin' gun in one hand and a bulgin' gunny sack in the other.

The man with the gun turned suddenly and ran into an alley between the bank and another building.

I yelled, "Hell's hogpen—that's Cherokee Ralls!" and I reared up and started for the door.

But I found I'd left my gun on the desk, and by the time I went back and got it and got out the door, Cherokee Ralls was spurrin' a hammer-headed

roan out of the alley. The bank was right across from the Texas House, and out of six-shooter range from my office. But I banged away anyhow. Cherokee Ralls looked toward me and yelled derisively, waving the gunny sack over his head.

Just when I thought Cherokee would make a clean getaway old Adam Tait, the banker, popped up in the bank doorway with a gun in hand. He blazed away at Cherokee—and he hit Cherokee's horse. The roan fell like its front legs had been chopped from under it, plowin' up the dusty street.

Cherokee Ralls hit on his feet, like a big black tomcat. He whirled, snarling wickedly, and hammered a shot at Adam Tait. Old Adam ducked back into the bank. Then Cherokee whirled again, and went leaping across the street toward the Texas House.

I saw right quick what he was at. He ran up to that big black of Smoky Hoff's. He jerked the reins loose, leaped into the saddle and dug in his spurs. The black squealed, went straight up, and came runnin'. He stormed down the street, away from me, like a streak of black lightning.

I STOPPED, stood there watchin' as Cherokee and the black disappeared in a cloud of dust at the edge of town. Men came boilin' into the street.

"He cleaned out the bank," declared old Adam. "And he shot young Bob Dade down in cold blood. Bob's bad hurt. It's the same old story. Cherokee Ralls robs, kills—and gets away scot-free. I tried to stop him—I shot his horse. If it hadn't been for that big black standing over there—"

Everybody turned and looked at Smoky Hoff who'd followed me into the street, and everything got pretty quiet.

"That's right," somebody said. "Looks mighty funny, that black happenin' to be in just the right place at the right time."

Smoky turned a kind of spotted color. He hollered, "If you mean I'm mixed up with this Cherokee Ralls, you're a mangy liar!"

I didn't think that. But I was pretty sore about Cherokee makin' a monkey out of me again. And it wouldn't have happened except for Smoky leavin' that black there before the Texas House.

"Kid," I said, "you light a shuck for the jail. Ain't any use chasin' Cherokee now, with the start he's got and him on that black. He'd be in the hills before we got started."

"No, he wouldn't," Smoky said slowly. "Not on Nero."

"Why wouldn't he?"

Smoky looked embarrassed. He started making marks in the dust with his boot toe.

"Because the black's been 'painted'!" he blurted. "Just like them fantails I sold Ed Tarrant, only it's a better job. He'll drop before he runs three miles!"

"Dang-bust you, kid!" I yelled. "What you mean tryin' to sell me a 'painted' animal?"

"I didn't!" Smoky yelled back. "I told you he wasn't for sale. Could I help it if you was dumb enough to want him?"

"I'll take it outo your hide! I'll—"

"Don't stand here bellerin'," Adam Tait said. "Get after Cherokee Ralls!"

And we did. About a dozen of us piled onto broncs and fogged out of town. And we'd gone just about three miles when we found out Smoky had told the truth. We found the black there beside the trail, standin' spraddle-legged, head almost draggin' the ground, all played out.

Cherokee had holed up among some cliffs nearby. He put up a fight, but pretty soon we had him, and the bank money, and I took him back to town and locked him in a cell.

When I got back to my office Smoky Hoff was there. He looked stubborn and a little mad.

"I ain't mixed up with no dirty bank robber," he said.

"I didn't say you was. Now about this wuthless crowbait you tried to sell me—"

"I didn't! I admit I aimed to sell him to some big rancher—somebody who had plenty of money. It wasn't my fault, was it, that you tried to blackmail me into sellin' him to you?"

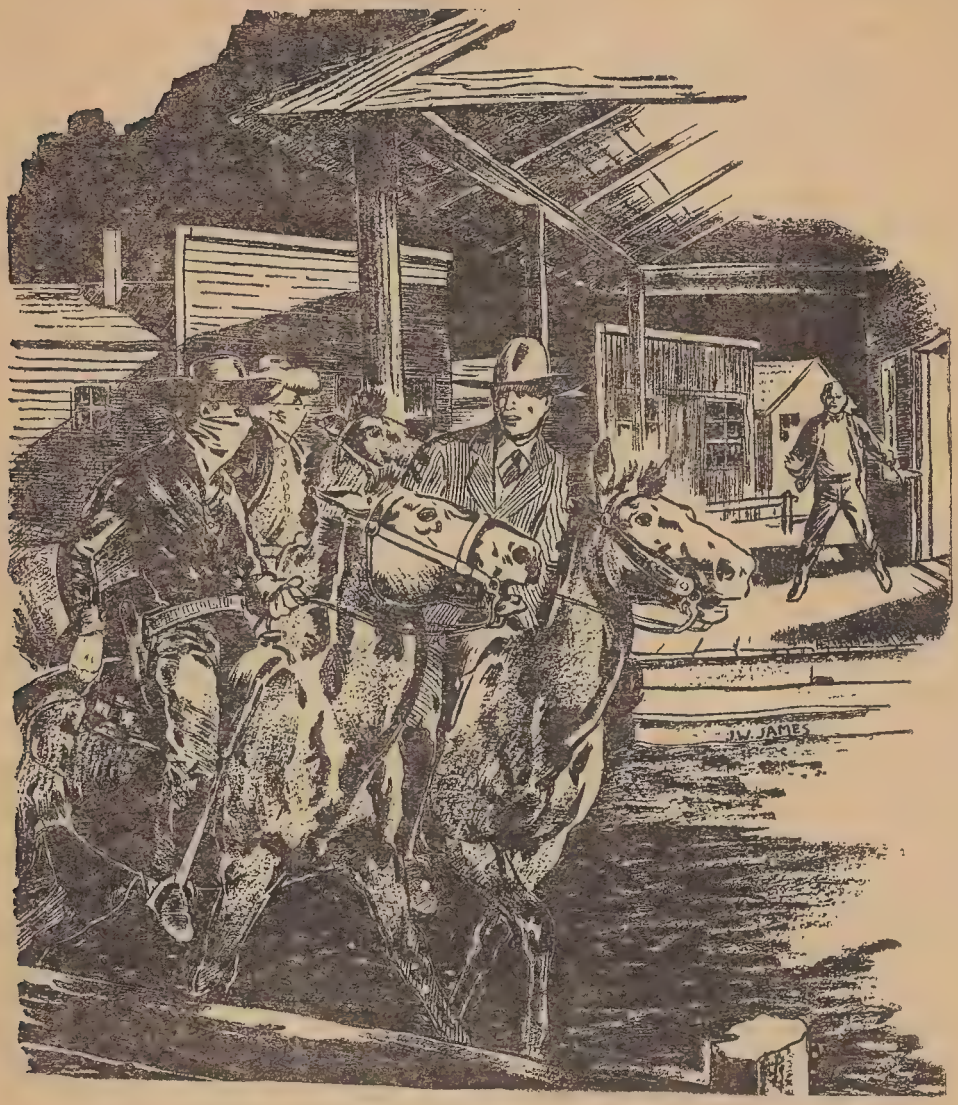
"Don't holler so loud," I said. "Point is, you ain't safe to be runnin' loose on an unsuspectin' public. How'd you like a job as my deputy?"

Smoky started to get mad again. Then he saw I wasn't jokin'. He swallowed hard. Then he grinned.

"I'll take it," he said. "I can see this office needs somebody with brains."

I figured maybe he was right. I said, "As of right now, you're my deputy!"

Trigger Stone, M. D.



Before Doc Stone, an outlaw's cub, could hang out his shingle, he had to swap his medicine kit for a bullet-studded gunbelt.

By Wilson L. Covert

THE bullets of Sheriff Ward's posse snarled through the windows of Eph Stone's beleaguered cabin, searching out its defenders one by one. Two of the gang were dead, three so deeply lead-bitten they couldn't raise a gun but sat propped up against the wall, awaiting the end. It was a rope's end for any taken alive. None knew it better

than grizzled Eph, leader of the law-busters, as young Cleve, his son, plugged the wound in his side with a strip of handkerchief.

"You're only savin' me for the gallows," Eph said gloomily, yet with a certain pride in the boy's deftness.

Cleve raised his sweat-beaded face. He had been ministering to the wounded ever since Ward's posse closed in. "I kept tellin' you the longridin' would wind up this way. You can't beat the law."

A bandit with chin sunk on chest, spoke in hollow-toned voice. "You could help us, Cleve, by turnin' your smoke-pole on that posse. Ain't many can shoot like you."

Cleve had inherited old man Eph's gun skill. But he never had shot at any except inanimate targets. His natural impulse was to save life, not to take it. Animals or humans, he doctored them every chance he got. Few medical books came Cleve's way, but he treasured those few.

He turned a troubled eye on the desperately wounded man beside his father. "That's the law out yonder, Dudley. I don't like to fight against the law."

"You stick to that, son," said Eph. "I ain't been the right kind of a father. But at least I never let you ride with us."

Two bandits still knelt at the smoke-wreathed, splintered windows, working triggers. One jerked backwards and sprawled down. Cleve, his wiry figure bent, started to drag the man out of range of the window. He saw the bullet hole between bulging eyes and retreated. The other bandit suddenly deserted his post, shouting:

"They've got a batterin'-ram!"

The end of a log smashed at the door. Three times it struck before bolt and hinges gave way. The smoke-hazed sunlight was blotted out by an entering wedge of men, the burly sheriff foremost. One Colt spoke its final note of defiance, the last outlaw on his feet sinking with a half-dozen bullets through his wolf-lean body.

CLEVE rushed to his father, stood over him, fingers twitching. He suddenly screamed, "You can't hang the old man! You can't!" His right hand slapped the gun butt swaying outward from his hip. Eph Stone heaved up, caught the moving arm.

"No, Cleve, no! Don't be a fool now!"

The sheriff dodged in, grabbed the sagging Colt. Cleve, with a smothered sob, gave up.

"He wasn't shootin' at you, Ward," Eph stated, steadying himself with hand pressed to the wall. "Look at the gun. All he done was patch us up. You know Cleve, always bent on doctorin'."

"Guess he'd busted loose if you hadn't stopped him, Eph," the sheriff answered grimly.

"Who'd blame him for tryin' to defend the old man?" spoke a cowman whose spade beard was sprinkled with gray. "Blood's thicker'n water, Ward. And no matter what Eph's done, you can't tell me the boy was mixed in it. That time blackleg broke out among my cattle Cleve made himself right useful."

"He's the old wolf's whelp, Meacham," another stockman said harshly, "not deservin' to be treated 'any different from the rest."

Cleve gazed in dull misery at the last speaker, Dave Pascoe, of the Broken Rail brand.

"I should think you'd be the last one to condemn the boy, Dave," declared Lark Meacham. "Him and your daughter bein' so friendly."

"Not with my approval!" Pascoe snorted.

The sheriff, who had been examining Cleve's gun, announced, "Hasn't been fired lately, but tie him up with the others who're able to ride."

Cleve rode beside his father when the party moved out over the dusty miles to Brushwood. His mind was a ferment. The triumphant entry of the posse with shackled prisoners drew the townsfolk about them in a swarm. Cleve's cheeks burned, he kept his eyes fixed on the ears of his mount. Suddenly a slim hand was laid on his knee. A brown-haired girl was walking beside the horse, looking up at Cleve with white, distressed face.

"What have you done, Cleve?" Lola Pascoe's voice trembled.

"Nothin'," he replied, "except get caught with the gang. I'm sorry you're here, Lola."

Dave Pascoe urged his horse up from the rear and sharply ordered, "Back on the sidewalk, Lola! It's the last time I want to see you talkin' to this bandit's son!"

She had something of old Dave's temper and turned on him defiantly. "Cleve says he's done nothing. I believe that. I'm walking with him as far as the jail."

Eph Stone and the survivors of his gang got the death sentence, but Cleve was acquitted. Lark Meacham, on the stand, promised to look out for him. Even the sheriff spoke in Cleve's favor, producing the unfired gun.

Lola was the first to congratulate Cleve after the sheriff released him, her father looking on, grim-lipped. Young Stone was grateful to all who had stood by him, but couldn't forget the old man was going

to the gallows. When his eyes sought the condemned man, still in the prisoners' dock, Eph smiled. Smiled because his son wasn't going the way of the outlaw. It didn't ease the horrible tightness in Cleve's chest.

Meacham took Cleve home with him. He asked the boy, "What you want to be—a veterinarian?"

"I want to doctor people," Cleve replied, "but I haven't any money to get educated for it."

"You let me worry about the money, boy. I've been runnin' the Rafter M brand on this range a good many years. Have no family. We're goin' to send you to one of them medical schools. Now wait—if you'd feel better to repay me after you hang out your shingle, I'll agree to that."

Cleve Stone was away from the bunch grass country a long time. Once a week came a cheering letter from Lola. Old Lark wrote less often, but usually there was a check enclosed. He was in his last year at medical college when he read in the paper that the home range had suffered from a long drought. The herds of many cattlemen had been greatly reduced. Lola and old Lark hadn't mentioned this in their letters. Cleve knew the Rafter M wasn't big enough to stand much loss. He wrote Meacham he would come home at once if things weren't going well. He received a wire from Lark in deply:

RAIN YESTERDAY, LOOKS LIKE MORE RAIN TODAY. YOU STAY AND GET THAT DOCTOR'S DEGREE. AM DOING ALL RIGHT.

ONE day Cleve returned to Brushwood. The two people he most wanted to see, advised of his coming, were right there on the platform when he got off the train. He was a different looking Cleve Stone, in blue serge suit, a wide-brimmed, low-crowned white hat. Lola was prettier than ever. Lark looked older than he ought, hair and beard now white. He seemed ill at ease when Dave Pascoe came around the corner of the station. To Cleve's surprise, Dave was smiling, holding out his hand.

"I didn't think you could do it, young fellow," Dave said. "You're a full-fledged sawbones, are you, ready to dose us sick dogies?"

Lola was delighted to see her father and the man who had justified her faith, shaking hands. Pascoe's smile faded as he glanced at Meacham and turned away. They didn't speak. Lark told Cleve there was an empty office down on the corner of Main and Mesquite, that he might want to look at. The oldster seemed in a hurry to go, not even asking Cleve out to the Rafter M.

After he had ridden off, Cleve said to Lola, "What's wrong? I noticed he and your father acted like strangers."

Lola's face was grave. "I don't believe it's anything to worry about, but almost on the heels of the drought came rustlers. An outfit run by Jess Harbison, a newcomer, is under suspicion. There are some who believe Lark, his herd depleted by the drought, rides at night with Harbison. To my mind, Cleve, a man who did what Lark Meacham did for you would be incapable of stealing from his old neighbors."

But young Doc Stone was worried. In the morning he hired a saddle horse, rode up to the Rafter M. He saw only a few head of stock with Lark's brand on them. The oldster was alone at the ranch.

"Why ain't you back in town, fittin' up an office to take care of your patients?" he asked Cleve sharply. "What brought you up here? Heard talk that Jess Harbison is a long looper and I'm friendly with him, huh?"

Doc Stone nodded soberly. "I owe you everything, Lark. I wouldn't want to be the cause of your stepping outside the law. I asked if the drought had put you in a hole—"

"Now, look a-here." Lark gripped him by the arm. "I'm proud of you, see? It's like havin' my own son make good. Don't be sidetracked from the main issue, which is gettin' your shingle out, by fool talk. Harbison is all right, but a target for them that've had stock rustled because he's new on the range. Got that settled in your mind?"

Cleve went away unsatisfied. It took courage to begin life again in a cow-town where everyone knew what his father had been. Patients were slow in coming. Some were prejudiced because he was the son of an outlaw. Others thought him young and inexperienced, and had been accustomed to having old Doctor Rance cure their ills. Cleve's first important case was that of the town marshal's wife, who had stepped into an uncovered well in the dark.

She was still under Cleve's care when, one night a party of horsemen swung up to his door. They filed into the lamplit office, Dave Pascoe at their head, his bloody left arm slung in a bandanna.

"Doc Rance is out on the trail, Cleve," said Pascoe, "but I reckon you can patch us up. We bayed that rustlin' gang in the canyon up beyond the river, fought all afternoon. They slipped out, packin' two or three we killed, when night set in. We think it was the Harbison outfit, but

couldn't see 'em good, for the fightin' was at saddle-gun range. No use tryin' to pick up their trail, so we hit for town, most of us needin' a sawbones."

As he dressed their wounds, Doc Stone wondered if they had come to see how he would take the news of the battle. Nothing in the young doctor's face or the swift, sure movements of his hands betrayed his fear that old Lark might have been one of those slain. After they had gone, Cleve put on his white Stetson, went to the closet where hung the six-gun and belt he had never expected to wear again. At that moment a horse halted outside. Lark Meacham entered, dragging his right foot. He dropped in a chair and tried to grin at Doc.

"Me and the Harbison outfit was wolf-huntin'. You've heard of hunters shootin' each other by accident—"

The look on Cleve's face stopped him. Doc pulled off the boot, the blood-wet sock. Lark had lost two toes. With one ear strained for sounds in the street, young Stone set grimly to work. Lark, clenching his teeth, didn't speak until the foot was neatly bandaged. Then he said:

"Harbison and a couple of his boys was hurt worse'n me. If you could go up and see 'em, Cleve—"

THE screen door slammed, and Pascoe and his friends crowded into the room. Hand on six-shooter, the Broken Rail boss roared: "One of the boys seen you limp in here, Meacham! Stopped a bullet s'afternoon, didn't you?"

"I did," replied Lark, with amazing coolness, "but how'd you know? Was you wolf-huntin', too?"

Pascoe took a step forward, barking, "Two-legged wolves, yeh! Don't stir, Meacham, till I get your cutter!"

Doc Stone had moved to the right side of Lark's chair. He said, "I'll get it!" He snatched the Colt from Lark's holster, swung it on Dave Pascoe, who stopped dead, staring.

"When you were here before, Pascoe," said Doc, "you said you didn't recognize any of those rustlers. Lark tells a different story about how he was shot in the foot."

"You know he's lyin'!" Pascoe burst out. "If you protect him, you're as bad as Meacham!"

Doc Stone eyed him coldly. "I've never killed a man, but I'll begin now unless you clear the way to that door! Lark's leaving!"

Pascoe remembered to have seen such a look on Cleve's face long ago, when he stood over old Eph Stone in a powder-smoked cabin. Old Dave sidled toward the wall, motioning to his friends. Meacham limped past them, Cleve following, the gun covering the cattlemen until he was outside. He rushed Lark into the saddle, stuck the pistol in his holster, though the oldster protested:

"You'd better keep it! They'll gang you!"

As the horse clattered off, Doc wheeled. Pascoe and his friends were silhouetted at the door, wary about rushing out. Dave was the first to discern Cleve's empty hands. He leaped onto the sidewalk, fired at the vanishing horseman. Doc sprang at him, jerked his arm down. Other figures spilled through the doorway. Cleve's fist cracked on the jaw of one cowman. Then a gun barrel, catching him behind the ear, felled Doc.

He came to, sprawled in an office chair. Tod Buckins, the town marshal, was in the group surrounding him. Buckins was saying:

"I don't like to arrest Doc, that's a fact."

"You will if you want to keep your job!" Pascoe snapped. "Meacham's a rustler, and Stone let him get away. That's obstruction of justice. Lock him up till the sheriff gets back."

Marshal Buckins said reluctantly, "Guess I'll have to, Doc. Can you walk? Let's go, then."

Cleve spent the night in the Brushwood jail.

"I feel like a dog keepin' you here, Doc," the marshal told him next morning. "My wife would've died, hadn't it been for you. Now she's sure on the mend."

Cleve had been thinking things over. "I wouldn't like to get you in trouble, Tod, but if I was loose for a few hours I believe I could do a better job of catching those rustlers than the sheriff."

"How?" said Buckins. "Evidently you don't think Lark's one of 'em."

"Ever know him to steal?" asked Cleve.

"Never." Buckins thought awhile. "I owe you a debt money can't square. I'll take the responsibility of lettin' you out. But Pascoe and his friends, knowin' how I feel, are still in town. They're watchin' for that very thing to happen. Better wait till night and play safe."

By eight o'clock that evening, all the cattlemen had apparently gone home. Marshal Buckins ushered Cleve out the back door of the calaboose, wished him luck. Palming the knob of his office door, young Stone detected the faint clink of spur chains dragging on the ground. Doc wheeled, made out the familiar form of Dave Pascoe, flanking a six-shooter.

"I figured that no-account marshal would release you after dark," Pascoe said in a brittle tone, "so I been watchin'

your office from behind that fence across the street. I thought maybe you had changed since comin' back to Brushwood. But you ain't. And I'm not runnin' the chances of my daughter marryin' an outlaw. You get a gun and come down the street where it's lighter!"

Doc opened the door, said quietly, "Wait till I light up."

The cattleman stood at the door until a lamp glowed in the office, then stepped inside, his face white with anger.

"If the jail can't hold you, six foot of earth in boot hill'll do it! Hurry up and get armed, Stone!"

Cleve had faced about at his desk. He was studying the Broken Rail boss with his best professional air.

"I don't like your pallor, Pascoe," he said abruptly.

"My what?"

"Look in that glass." Cleve pointed to a wall mirror. "Don't be afraid. My gun's in the closet."

PASCOE gazed at his reflection and whirled back. "You tryin' to make out I'm sick? A man sometimes gets pale when he's mad like I am!"

"We'll see," replied young Stone. "I'm a doctor, remember. Come closer and put up that gun."

The cattleman obeyed slowly, an uneasy expression crossing his face. Doc Stone lifted a stethoscope from his desk, told Dave to open his shirt. Pascoe's big hands fumbled.

"Ever troubled with shortness of breath?" Doc asked.

The stockman frowned in thought. "I dunno. Maybe. What you think's the matter with me, Doc?"

"Quiet," said Cleve, applying his instrument to Pascoe's chest. Finally he laid it aside. "It's not my business to scare people, Pascoe, but a man with your bad heart should be warned. Too much exertion or excitement, and you may go out like a light. You won't have to wait for somebody to put a bullet through you."

"Why, Doc," stammered Dave, "I've hardly been sick a day in my life."

"A man can be sick without knowing it," stated young Stone gravely.

Pascoe, who could face gunfire without flinching, was rattled at the thought of dropping dead without warning. He walked unsteadily from the doctor's office. He had forgotten his intention to kill young Stone.

Cleve smiled thinly as he listened to the retreating steps. "That's one way to avoid shooting him, and keep him off my neck for tonight."

Doc pulled on riding boots, got his gun from the closet and buckled it on under his coat. He picked up his hat and medicine case, turned down the lamp. Stepping out on the sidewalk, Doc stiffened as three riders, with a led horse, drew up before the door. Neckcloths masked them to the eyes, and two held upraised smoke-poles.

"Goin' on a sick call, Doc?" asked a strange voice. "Well, we've got one that's real urgent. Even brung you a horse. Fall into the saddle!"

Doc Stone showed no reluctance to mount. He had no doubt they were from Harbison's ranch, had been going to ride that way as soon as he got his horse from the livery stable. They whirled out of town, rounding the corner of a merchandise store. The proprietor glimpsed the bandannas worn outlaw fashion by three of the riders, the white sombrero topping a fourth. Nobody but Doc Stone had a hat like that.

Heading up the north trail, Doc Stone and his escort caught a metallic clangor on the night breeze. Clearing the shin oak to their right, they sighted a huddle of ranch buildings. The sound of iron striking iron issued from the lighted doorway of a small blacksmith shop. On a nearby slope stood a round pen filled with horses. Cleve knew it was the Anchor ranch, owned by Tom Rankin, one of the cowmen he had treated for gunshot wounds.

"Say," exclaimed a night rider, pulling up, "why couldn't we run off that cavvy? Rankin's brought all his saddlers in from the range, shoein' 'em for the roundup. If two of us opened up, them fellows around the smithy would duck inside, I betcha. One's enough to turn them broncs outa the corral, and they drive faster'n cattle. Anchor boys couldn't follow if they had nothin' to ride."

Another outlaw voiced approval. "Okay, Durfee! But first we'll have to tie Doc."

They hadn't noticed that Cleve was armed. But as the last speaker swung his horse about, yanking a gun to enforce submission, Doc Stone's right hand flashed down and up. The startled rustler's thumb punched the hammer prong. But Doc, firing on the upswing, tumbled him backward off his horse. As Cleve slued round to face the other two, their lead whined into thin air. Luckily they were both on the same side.

One outlaw cried out and his gun rolled from limp fingers. Cleve's horse, pitching a little, suddenly keeled over with a bullet in its brain. Doc went down with it, shooting at a figure hipped in the saddle and making smoke. His head and shoulders drove against a trailside boulder, the dead horse pinning his left leg.

He was oblivious of what occurred for some time afterward.

When next he knew anything, Doc was pounding along a hard trail, head down across a saddle. The ride ended almost at the moment he regained consciousness. Lamplight through an open door cut the blackness; voices were raised to an excited pitch. He was pulled from the saddle, up a flight of wooden steps. The sustaining arms let him fall in a room smelling of whisky and stale tobacco smoke. He raised himself at a sharp cry.

"What'd they do to you, Cleve?"

He saw Lark Meacham across the room, lashed to a homemade barrel chair. Three men, bound with bloodstained bandages, sat at a card-littered table. One, tawny-mustached, was regarding the young doctor with fierce hawk's eyes.

DURFEE, the rider who had brought Cleve to the ranch, snarled at Meacham, "I thought you said Doc didn't pack a gun?" He told how the horse raid had been frustrated. "I seen Doc wasn't dead, so fetched him along. But them boys he killed will be found by Rankin, Jess. I couldn't—"

The hawk-eyed man banged a fist on the table, making a black bottle totter. "The whole thing was mismanaged, Durfee! I sent you after Doc Stone, not to raid the Anchor corral. Now, Doc, it'll pay you to forget we're rustlers. Me and these two hombres"—he indicated the others at the table—"are shot up worse than we look."

Cleve had risen to his feet. "First I want to know why Meacham's a prisoner."

Jess Harbison's eyes narrowed. "We've never fully trusted him, figured he might be workin' undercover for the ranchers. But he was handy. He don't know yet where we sold the rustled cattle. Two days ago we near got trapped. I ain't sure but it was his doin', although he was wounded himself. He volunteered to get you up here, then came back without you, tellin' some yarn about Pascoe and his friends preventin'—"

"Cleve," Lark clamored, "wasn't that how it happened? Didn't I start to ask you?"

Doc hadn't expected to find Lark in bad odor with the gang. The fact might be turned to Meacham's account in the end. He looked at the oldster without answering, and Harbison grinned slyly.

"I see how it is, Doc. You won't lie and won't give him dead away. We ought to kill Lark for a traitor, but I'll bargain with you, understandin' you two are heap friends. You doctor us till we're able to ride out and, if the law don't drop in before that, we'll let Meacham live."

Lark had closed his mouth when Cleve looked at him.

"I'll do it," said Doc Stone to Harbison. "Where's my medicine case?"

"In my saddlebag," spoke up Durfee. "Back in a shake."

Not counting Lark, there were six of the gang. Doc Stone examined the bullet-slashed outlaws, called for hot water. Durfee went to heat it on the kitchen stove. Two others helped the wounded remove blood-incrusted shirts. At the table, Doc laid out the contents of his black bag. With one eye on the outlaws, he shook a powder into the uncorked whisky bottle. Only Lark saw him, and the oldster's eyes suddenly gleamed.

In less than an hour, Cleve had finished. His three patients were stretched out on bunks. They insisted on keeping their guns by them. Durfee, stepping to the table, poured whisky into a tumbler. His uninjured mates joined him, and he asked Stone to have a snort.

"Seldom use it," replied Doc, "but give the patients some."

The men on the bunk drank eagerly from the bottle. Durfee suggested a little four-handed game to Cleve, since the night was yet young. Doc agreed. They had played about twenty minutes when Durfee yawned, rubbed his eyes with a grimy hand.

"This is just gettin' interestin'," he said, kicking back his chair. "I'm goin' to douse my head under the pump."

He went out by way of the kitchen door. The pair left behind caught themselves nodding. Cleve watched narrowly as they laid their cards face downward and got up heavily, to trail after Durfee. With a warning glance at bug-eyed Lark, Doc Stone walked softly to the bunks. The first man he looked at was snoring. Cleve reached for the six-shooter at the outlaw's side. Two bunks away, the harsh voice of Jess Harbison spoke.

"So you doped the whisky, Doc, aimin' to hand us over to the law! I've been fightin' to keep awake, see what you'd do after Durfee and them went out. Here's a lead pill for you, Doc!"

Cleve flung to his knees, fisting gun, as Harbison's .45 roared. The bullet streaked by Doc's left ear. Harbison was up on one elbow. Stone flipped hammer once, and the outlaw's Colt thumped to the floor, the hawkish eyes dulled.

DOC STONE dived for the shooting-iron on the middle bunk. The other wounded men weren't possuming like Jess had been. Glass tinkled as lead smashed through a side window. Stone

pitched a shot at the faces pressed to the pane and someone howled in agony. Cleve swung round and shot out the lamp. When guns blazed again at the broken window, he was flat on the floor. Two faces were briefly illumined by powder flashes. His ready Colt spoke and he heard the sound of a heavy fall. One was left. He thought it was Durfee.

He scrambled over to untie Lark, watching the window, listening for stealthy steps in the kitchen. Meacham suddenly whispered:

"Front door's movin'! He sneaked round the house."

Cleve turned, lifting his gun. Hinges silent, the door swung inward. A stab of flame lit the dark opening. Stone held fire, knowing Durfee would drop down as he squeezed trigger. He saw the jack-knifed figure on the door-sill and let drive. Durfee sprawled into the room, emitting a gusty sigh.

The appearance of Doc Stone and Lark Meacham in Brushwood next day, driving a ranch wagon, brought rangemen and townsfolk running. Cleve spied Lola when she seized her father's arm, only to be shaken off. The Broken Rail boss flourished a gun, yelling:

"Come down off that wagon, you fake medicine man! Doc Rance says I've got no more heart trouble than he has. You and that old night rider will swing together!"

Cleve stood up on the dashboard. The calm dignity of the youthful figure quelled the angry voices.

"Pascoe," said Doc Stone, "I had a good reason for scaring you last night. I didn't want your blood on my hands and I had urgent business at Harbison's ranch, as Marshal Buckins knows. I intended telling you later that you have a perfectly sound heart."

"Urgent business!" sneered Pascoe. "I guess so! You were seen leavin' town with three masked men. Joined the rustlers since you couldn't make a go of doctorin'!"

Doc caught sight of Tom Rankin, owner of the Anchor brand, and asked if he had found a couple of dead Harbison riders not far from his horse corral. Rankin said he had.

"They were going to tie me up and raid your corral," said Cleve. "I killed them. And if anyone wants further proof I'm not a night rider, let him look at the last two members of the Harbison gang, here in the wagon bed. The others are dead."

The crowd surged up to peer in at the wounded outlaws.

"I'll take charge of them," said Marshal Tod Buckins, "in the sheriff's absence. Now maybe you'll agree I done right in lettin' Doc go free, Pascoe!"

"Yeah," old Dave admitted, "but what about Lark Meacham? If Doc thinks we'll go easy on Lark because Harbison's gang is broke up—"

Doc Stone interrupted, "I'm not asking clemency for Lark. It isn't necessary. He's been living in danger of his life with that gang. He wanted to find out where the rustled stock was sold before exposing them. He never did learn, for Harbison and all the rest distrusted him. I found Lark a prisoner at the ranch. If you doubt me, ask these outlaws."

Old Lark, suddenly the focus of all eyes, squirmed on the wagon seat.

"You really was workin' to trap the gang," asked Dave Pascoe, "instead of playin' their game, Lark?"

"Could be, couldn't it?" returned Meacham.

Pascoe shoved gun in holster. "Sure looks like we've been too ready to hang a couple of good citizens, boys, and I want to be first to apologize."

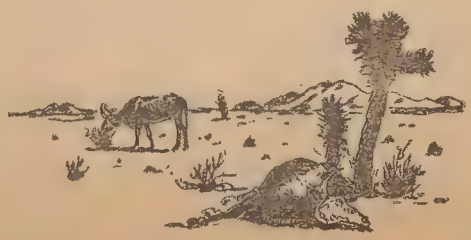
Cleve swung down from the wagon, leaving Lark a bit dazed, to shake the hands thrust up to him. The young doctor shouldered his way to where Lola Pascoe stood smiling. He said, looking down at her:

"I guess your father won't object now if I—"

Doc Stone paused. People were jostling them, talking all around them.

Lola wrinkled her brow. "Dad's objections wouldn't matter, but I'm glad they've been cleared away. What were you going to say, Cleve?"

"I'll tell you," he replied, taking her by the hand, "as soon as we get clear of this crowd."



Shackled to the Hangtree

By Robert S. Fenton

Although Bill Albershot's deputy's job had always been a sideline, a mysterious murder brought him into the limelight. For a man's past performance gave the lawman a stellar role at death's curtain call.

THE stage from Trumanville lurched into the main street of the cattle and mining town of Sumner at dusk, coming in much too fast. The horses were uncurbed and, tearing around the corner of the hotel, they nearly ripped their harness loose from the big vehicle. They just missed stamping out the lives of a woman and her child. The driver was rolling about on the seat as if he had drunk too much. When three husky cattlemen stopped the wild rush of the horses, he toppled and fell into the dust of the street.

Bill Albershot came out of the express office and joined the small group of men who were gathered around the silent figure sprawled in the dust. It was Zach Murdock and there was a hole in the front of his woolen shirt just about where a man would guess the top of Zach's lung would be.

"Out of the way!" a harsh voice boomed out. "Let me in here."

The tight circle broke and Ben Sutro, the sheriff, stepped in and took charge. He eyed Bill Albershot sourly and said, "Johnny on the spot, huh? I'll handle this, Bill."

"Naturally," the young deputy said dryly. He stepped back and tightened his mouth. Sutro was a selfish and ambitious man, utterly vain when it came to discharging the duties of his office. He asked for and generally got the full credit for anything accomplished in the way of upholding the law. He shook Zach a little and called the man's name. The driver muttered things that made no sense and Sutro said:

"The Doc. Where's Buford?"

"We sent for him," a man said. "He's up the far end of the street with a case of whoopin' cough on his hands."

"Get Zach into the hotel lobby," Sutro said. "No need to guess what happened. A holdup!"

"First in a long time," young Bill Albershot said. "What important stuff was Zach carryin' from Trumanville?"

"No use for secrecy now," Ben Sutro said as he watched two men carry Zach into the hotel. "There was fifty thousand dollars in currency in a pouch. A real estate transaction between the bank here and the Trumanville Trust Company. Don't figure there's much use to look for it."

In a few minutes Doc Buford came in. He was a portly man wearing thick eyeglasses. He knelt beside Zach and listened to the driver's heartbeat, examined the wound that still bled.

"Got a chance," he mumbled. "Better get him upstairs and into a bed. Go out into the kitchen, Bill, and tell a cook to heat me plenty of hot water. I got to dig that bullet out."

Ben Sutro cleared the lobby of all save half a dozen men. He sat down in a big chair and seemed to be trying to construct a picture in his mind. "Far as I can make out," he finally said, "only three men on this end knew anything about that money. No, there was four. Me, Exer LaProbe, the banker, my deputy and George Burgevine. I don't believe in waitin', gentlemen. Let's begin the inquiry now while the porridge is still hot."

"We should wait for Burgevine," LaProbe said.

"We can begin right away," Sutro persisted. "Burgevine! You would think this town would never run without the man. Hell, if I had his ways and his money, I'd be in the state legislature now."

ALWAYS Ben Sutro, especially when he had imbibed of spirits of a kind, told all those about him that only the right financial backing had kept him from being a big figure in the state. Money made the mare go and you got nowhere without it.

Sutro said, "Where have you been, Bill?"

The deputy stiffened. "What do you mean, sheriff?"

"Every man is guilty in my eyes until proven innocent, Albershot. I'm asking for your whereabouts the last three hours. It is well known that you need money badly and in a hurry because—"

"Find out for yourself, Sutro!" Bill said angrily. "Did it ever occur to you that some men in Trumanville knew about that money shipment? You can be too high-handed, sheriff, and you never did have a sense of humor."

"You don't say," Sutro sneered.

"I do," Albershot snapped. "Seems it just come to me that you only got in a half hour before the stage, sheriff. Maybe you want that legislature."

Ben Sutro got out of his chair, menacingly. Albershot planted his feet wide apart and stood his ground. It was then that George Burgevine walked in. The tension that had suddenly built up ran out. This man, by his presence alone, could reduce undue excitement and make calm wherever violence grew.

He said, "What is the trouble here, Ben?"

"The stage was held up and Zach Murdock's hurt pretty bad," Sutro said and let his pent-up breath loose. "We can't start nowhere until Zach is able to talk. It so happened that he had one passenger, but the woman fainted dead away. Zach must have tried to draw and he had a chance to get a look at the man."

"Or men," Bill Albershot said and Sutro's eyes clouded.

Burgevine said, "That is very bad," and settled into a big armchair.

He had come to Sumner seven years before and bought the ranch house of the now broken up Diamond T, and had restored it. He apparently had independent means and he had done much for the town. He was a director of the bank and part owner of the Sumner Theater, a house that drew all the best road shows touring the state.

Burgevine was a delicate scholarly appearing man, of medium height, and he wore hard white shirts and dark gray store suits. As for his past, it was secreted far back in the deep dark pools of his eyes. The women of Sumner, who would only notice such things, were of the opinion that some great sorrow still walked with the man.

"It is best to reason this out calmly, Ben," Burgevine said to Sutro. "Sooner or later you will get the guilty and bring them to trial."

Sutro nodded. "I always have, George. Anybody want a drink?"

Albershot shook his head. "The stuff makes loose tongues both here and in Trumanville, sheriff."

He walked out of the hotel and down the street toward Wallister's restaurant. He went in and sat on a rickety stool at the end of the counter nearest the kitchen and grinned at the girl in the crisp white apron. She had brown hair and eyes to match and there was a dimple in her strong chin. The healthy color of

her cheeks deepened as she put a big beef sandwich, swimming in gravy, in front of Albershot. She wrinkled her nose at him and shook a little index finger close to his nose.

"Explain why you're late, Mister!"

"You'd think you were already married to me," he said. "You should be."

He disdained the sandwich. Sometimes a man's heart needs feeding more than his stomach. For this girl he had gone through a painful readjustment, since she had made it quite plain that a cowpuncher's future was not a bright one. She knew most of them to be fiddle-footed and she liked to take root in one place and stay there. There was no gypsy blood in her. So Bill Albershot had quit the Lazy L and had become express agent in Sumner, and also had been made Sutro's deputy.

"We've talked that over more than once," Marlena Talbot said. "You know the agreement, Bill." She hurried down to the other end of the counter to give a man his pie.

Marlena. He remembered the day he had first heard the name. It was a strange name and had music in it and so really fitted her. He had ridden into Sumner from the ranch for the first time and had stopped just outside of town to find out what had lamed his sorrel. When he had removed the stone and was getting back into the saddle again, he had seen her sitting on the top rail of a high fence. She wore an old cotton shirt and dungarees and was barefooted. She asked him right out if he would let her ride the horse.

As he walked along beside her that day, she had told him her name and that she had lived as long as she could remember with her aunt and uncle, the Overmans.

A WEEK later, Albershot had inquired about the Overmans. Ben Sutro told him, "They're good folks, Bill, but always managed to stay mighty poor. Chris Overman's got a bad leg an' can't do much. Makes a dollar here and there. One bit of advice if you've seen the girl. They watch over her mighty strict an' will back it up with a load of buckshot."

The deputy had considered the sheriff's counsel but he and Marlena, during the two years that followed, had seen enough of each other to make them both realize they were in love. The first time he had asked her to marry him, she said, "Not for a while, Bill. Not until we're halfway secure.

"I've seen so much poverty at home that I've become terribly afraid of it. It makes quarrels and starts bickering. Wallister has promised me a job in the restaurant and I'm going to take it. I have to pay back my uncle and aunt for a while. If you don't think I'm worth waiting for, there are other girls in Sumner."

He finished his sandwich and had his pie and then looked at the clock. "Time to quit, Marlena," he said.

Wallister came out of the kitchen, tying a big apron around his big middle. "Yeah, run along, Missy." He grinned and winked at Albershot.

Walking along the street with him, Marlena said, "Have you thought up what you'll wear at the masquerade, Bill?"

"Not yet," he said. "Not much you can pick up in Sumner. There's a friend of mine in Trumanville has an old buckskin suit. Claims it belonged to Jim Bridger. Got a coonskin cap with it. Most likely et up by moths by this time. You fixed up anythin' yet?"

Marlena shook her head. "I want it to be very special, Bill. There's a hundred dollar prize for the best costume. And every hundred helps, doesn't it?" She pressed closer and smiled up at him and he said:

"Yeah, Marlena." He drew her toward the mealy shadows near a clump of locust trees and took her in his arms and kissed her. "I heard LaProbe say he'll put up a thousand dollars for the capture of the ones who stuck up Zach. That would help. It would mean—"

"Right away, Bill," Marlena whispered.

When he had left her a block from the house where she lived, he realized that he was whistling in the dark. Ben Sutro, no matter what else was said about the man, was a shrewd lawman and he had great courage. If it were possible to bring certain men to justice, he would be the one to do it. He never took a deputy into his confidence. Ben Sutro always made his opinion of deputies quite clear. They reminded him of a buzzard hovering close, waiting for the sheriff to die so they could swoop in and pick up his star.

Toward the middle of the next afternoon, Doc Buford passed by the express office. He called in through the door, "Bill, Zach's goin' to pull through. I told Sutro he could talk to Zach in about an hour."

Albershot grinned and eased a big brass-bound trunk to the floor. On it were splashed big black letters: THE POLARIS PLAYERS. The troupe was coming in on the late stage and would show in Sumner for a week. Every night, then, you would see George Burgevine

sitting in that box, his chin resting in his long slim hands as he watched the action on the stage. Invariably, when you passed by the hotel of an afternoon when a show was in town, George Burgevine would be on the porch talking with the troupers.

Marlena always said that Burgevine preferred a make-believe world, that at one time, no doubt, he had wanted to be a performer. It was Burgevine who had renovated the old theater and had publicized it far and wide. The Sumner Theater came before everything else as far as he was concerned. "It brings business into Sumner," Burgevine had said at a meeting of the leading lights of the town. "It also brings it culture and draws our people away from unhealthy entertainment such as gambling and excessive drinking."

SHORTLY after Sutro arrived, Bill Albershot entered the room where Zach Murdock was propped up in bed.

The sheriff said irritably, "It does not require two men to question a sick one, Albershot."

"I prefer to stay," the deputy snapped. "It is my duty to know all that's going on, Sutro. Sheriffs have been known to drop out suddenly and I am the logical successor."

"Stop hopin', Albershot," Sutro sneered. "I'll outlive you. I'll get the skunk who plugged Zach and I'll bring him in with the irons on him."

Zach said, "I only got a glimpse of the holdup man, sheriff. He had a cloth over his face and he was bent forward so he could have been short or tall. I am sure there wasn't nobody with him. I tried for my gun and then I was hit. It's about all I remember."

"Right where we started," Albershot said. He walked out with Ben Sutro, and when they reached the sidewalk he said, "If you need me, Ben—"

"I won't need you or anybody else, Bill!" the lawman said and walked away, his boots making heavy sounds against the planks. Albershot went back to the express office. Three hours later the stage came in and the theatrical troupe piled out and went into the hotel. The deputy took care of the freight the stage had brought and then went up to Wallister's to meet Marlena.

During the next three days, Sutro was ever on the move. He would leave Sumner for hours at a stretch. When he was in his office he would bar the door to everyone and sit in his big chair and add up things in his mind. One afternoon Bill Albershot walked past the hotel and he saw George Burgevine sitting with a big man who wore his silvery hair long and whose clothes marked him as a man of the theater. The deputy had seen him in an important rôle the night before. He was the leader of the troupe.

Burgevine smiled and asked, "Anything come up, Albershot?"

"Ask Ben Sutro," the deputy said. He kept on and was pleasantly surprised to meet Marlena coming out of the dry goods store. The lights in her eyes were dancing so he knew she had something exciting on her mind.

"Well," he said, "who left you a million dollars, Marlena?"

"It'll be a surprise, Bill," the girl said. "You'll have to wait until the night of the dance." She gave him an affectionate pat on the arm. "I'm in a terrible hurry and can't stop to talk."

"You found something, maybe," the deputy grinned. "You dug an old chest out of the garden and there was Lillie Langtry's best dress in it."

"You're psychic, Bill Albershot," the girl laughed, and hurried away.

At sundown, Ben Sutro rode into Sumner ahead of a dead-ax wagon that was flanked by two punchers from the Running J. There was something on the floor of the big wagon covered with a blanket. Sutro reined in his big bronc in front of the undertaking parlor and got out of the saddle. A little man sitting out in front of the express office called in to Bill Albershot:

"Somethin's happened. They're luggin' somebody into Thripp's place."

The deputy legged it up the street and caught at Sutro's arm. "Who is it, Ben?"

"Joel Yount," the sheriff said and a shadow of a smile bisected his rugged face.

Albershot sucked in his breath. Yount owned the last big cattle spread in the section, the Running J.

"Don't get all het up," Sutro said as he rolled a smoke. "Natural causes, Bill. Keeled over out by Howling Gap. Hack never would admit he couldn't do as much in a day as his young riders. His heart give out. I just happened to be passin' by that cow camp when the punchers yelled at me.

"I got the stuff that was in his pockets and turned them over to his widow. All that was of use to her." Sutro's eyes were a little roily, what you could see of them through half-closed lids. "Tonight, Bill, I think I'll take a short ride. Or maybe in the mornin'."

He had something, that Sutro, Bill Albershot knew. Somewhere, sometime during the day, he had picked up a little thread of evidence regarding the holdup of the stage. And the sheriff said with

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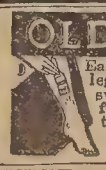

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his eyes, "I'll do this alone. Keep out of my way, Albershot!"

GEORGE BURGEVINE walked by, face grave, and went into the undertaker's. He had been a close friend of Yount's, had often visited the rancher at the Running J.

"When a man dies, his friends flock around," Ben Sutro said bluntly. "I think I'll take that ride tomorrow, Bill. I think I'll just stay here."

Exer LaProbe, the banker, went in to see Joel Yount. Two hours later three other men arrived in Sumner and paid their respects. One of them was Bill Albershot's old boss, Drew Harley, who had won the ranch he owned with the turn of a card in Trumanville. When these men went in, the undertaker came out and said that no one else could see Yount until the next morning, until he could be properly laid out. He shut and locked the door and the crowd moved away.

Ben Sutro rode out of Sumner at nine o'clock the next morning. At dusk his horse came in and loped up to the livery stable and stood there, its head hanging. The stableman ran to get Bill Albershot.

There was no blood on the horse or on Sutro's saddle. The deputy quickly had the stableman saddle a black bronc at random and rode that way, wishing that Sutro had been more of a co-operative man. He rode the country within a radius of twenty miles all that night. When the sun broke he rested in a bunk at Yount's ranch for a few hours.

At noon Albershot was brooming the trails again. He finally dropped down a long slope eight miles from Sumner when his black shied and nearly slammed him against an outcropping of rock. The reason for the action was fifty feet ahead. A dead man lay face down on the bank of an arroyo and high overhead a scavenger wheeled.

Bill Albershot was sure who the man was before he turned him over. It was Sutro. The back of his head was battered and bruised and the blood had dried. He had either been smashed lifeless with a rock or some hastily snatched weapon. Near the body was a sack of tobacco and a package of cigarette papers that had been ground into the soft dirt. The deputy hunkered down and tried to paint a mental picture. Sutro, he thought, had stopped for a smoke and his prisoner, if he had had one, had made good his escape.

Suddenly, Albershot went through Ben Sutro's clothes. He found a little key he knew belonged to the heavy handcuffs Sutro always carried. But Sutro's hand-

cuffs were missing. A man was walking around with them on? After battering the sheriff with the manacles? It did not make sense to Bill. He might have got one crack at Sutro and that was all. The sheriff had been a strong man and amazingly agile for a man of his bulk.

Albershot started seaching. At the end of a half-hour he saw the glint of metal near a clump of mesquite. He walked over there and picked up a pair of heavy handcuffs, snapped shut, and slowly wiped them clean. Would a man be able to thrust his manacled hands into the pocket of Sutro's coat, get the key and manage to insert it in the lock and open the cuffs? And then snap them shut again and throw them away?

Again Bill Albershot rued the fact that Sutro had been a vain and selfish man. He sat there and wracked his mind and became certain that Yount's death had given Sutro a clue to the robbery. Something Yount had had on his person . . . Albershot went back and searched Sutro's body but found nothing to go on.

A few hours later a wagon stopped once more in front of Thripp's. Bill Albershot sat on the black horse and watched the remains of Ben Sutro go into the undertaker's. Townspeople kept building up in front of the place and their faces were solemn.

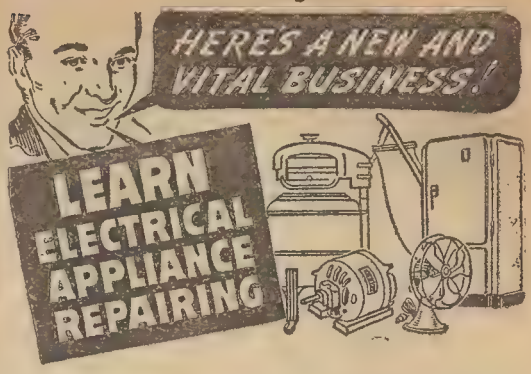
George Burgevine said to the deputy, "You got an idea who might have killed him, Bill?"

"No," the man who was now the sheriff, said. He suddenly took the badge of authority from his vest pocket and pinned it on his vest. "But there isn't a hole big or small enough for him to hide in for very long. Me and Sutro had our differences, but he was a solid man. He was stubborn and that is why this happened, Mr. Burgevine."

Bill Albershot rode to the stable and turned the black over and then walked slowly to the sheriff's office. He took the handcuffs from his belt and dropped them onto the desk, opened them with the little key. He thought grimly that these might trap a man and hold him for keeps the next time. They'd never take the place of a good rope. These newfangled methods were not what they were cracked up to be. After fastening them securely in place again, he got up and walked out and went over to Wallister's.

MARLENA'S smile was forced. "It is a terrible thing, Bill," she said. "Ben Sutro was a good man. He was strong and was not a careless man. Please be careful too, Bill. If they can kill Sutro, they—"

"Nobody'll kill me, Marlena." He



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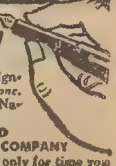

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smiled faintly. "At least, not until after I have those dances with you. Three nights from now, and I got nothing to wear to the thing. You've found what you want. I can tell easily enough. You would never be a good poker player. What's the dress like, Marlena?"

"It's a secret, Bill," the girl said. "But it will win the prize. I know it will because it's old and—wait until you see what was wrapped up in it. I'm taking them back to the hotel when I'm through here." She ran into the kitchen and he drank his coffee, barely tasting it. She came out with something wrapped up in a yellowed newspaper and placed it on the counter in front of him. She unwrapped the brittle newsprint carefully and then Bill Albershot picked up an old photograph and some clippings from an old journal.

"He was a handsome man," Marlena whispered. "Queenie must have been a lucky girl."

The man in the old photograph had heavy curly hair. His face was finely chiseled, with broad forehead and handsome wide mouth. Across the bottom of the picture was the written inscription: *To Queenie, with my undying love, forever and ever. Carlisle.*

The sheriff kept looking at the picture and did not hear Marlena say the first time, "She was very much in love with him, Bill. She kept these old clippings about him. Read them, Bill."

"What?" he said and put the picture down. He started reading the print on the yellowed cutouts. A long thin cold finger began to trace along his spine and he looked up and asked Marlena, "Where did you get this stuff?"

"From Mr. Kyle at the hotel, Bill. I was stewing about what I could wear at the dance one afternoon when I was having tea with the Ladies' Aid and he overheard me. He took me aside after the others had gone. He said he remembered an old trunk he had taken to the storeroom on the top floor and had almost forgotten about it. Some actress went away one time and left it and never came back. It was almost twenty years ago."

"Her name was Queenie," the sheriff said.

"Yes. The name is on some of her things. Queenie Lachelle. Isn't it terribly romantic, Bill? Almost spooky—"

"Spooky? I guess that's the word, Marlena." He looked at the clippings once more and terrible reality cut through the aura of make-believe that surrounded him. Carlisle Benette, Escape King. The Amazing Benette Who Laughs at Locksmiths! Carlisle Benette, the Man Who Has Electrified Thousands!

"Bill, what's wrong?"

He did not say anything for a while. Finally he folded up the clippings and placed them on top of the picture. "The past, Marlena. They call it the long ago, the dead past. It occurs to me that it is as close as morning and night, always. Don't take those back until I tell you to."

"All right, but I don't see—"

"I am glad that you don't," he said. "Not yet. I won't see much of you until the night of the dance, Marlena. Until then—"

"Bill, please be careful. I'm frightened now. I wish you'd never got that star."

"The pay is good," Albershot said. "It means a lot now, Marlena." She leaned across the counter and let him kiss her.

As he left the restaurant she hurried to the door and watched him until he was out of sight, until he and the black horse became swallowed up in the dark beyond the reach of the street lamps.

Bill Albershot went out to see Joel Yount's foreman and he called in at his old boss's spread two hours later. The evidence was piling up, he knew. He was sure he had his man. But there was tangible proof he also had to have to go along with the evidence Marlena Talbot had inadvertently produced. More than ever he realized what this girl meant to him, and he told himself he would be doubly careful.

BACK in Sumner, he went to his boardinghouse and slept soundly until two hours after dawn. That night, he took Marlena to the theater and watched a new road company play Hamlet. He also watched the man sitting in the box close to the stage, the man who gazed at the principals in the drama with fierce intensity. George Burgevine. The sheriff felt a chill that no one else in the audience felt. He thought of delicate plants that were beautiful to see, but which at the same time were deadly at the roots and in the vital sap they bore.

Marlena said, "Isn't it wonderful, Bill?" and held tightly to his arm.

He mumbled something. He was thinking of Ben Sutro and not the Prince of Denmark.

It was ten o'clock the next evening when Bill Albershot rode out of Sumner and took a road that stretched southwest. He crossed a low range of hills and dipped down into a valley and rode across its moonlit width. Then he picked up a road that ascended the opposite wall.

He glanced behind him at the crumbling corrals and old outbuildings that had once been part of a big cattle spread. Turning his head, he looked up at the

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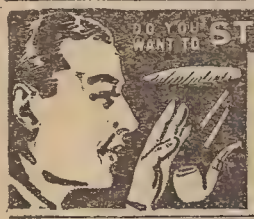

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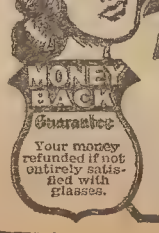

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low rambling structure that had been built against a sheer rock wall. This was Burgevine's home. There was a light gleaming at one end of the house.

Albershot rode up onto the great shelf that was the front yard. He got out of the saddle and hitched his black horse to a heavy post. Reaching the front door, he knocked against its heavy planks. He waited almost five minutes before its old hinges squalled. Burgevine peered out and said:

"Who is there?"

"The sheriff," Bill said.

Burgevine swung the door open and let him come in. The man wore an old dressing gown of silk and puffed slowly on a big pipe.

"This is an unusual hour to make a call," he said pleasantly enough.

Bill Albershot walked into the big living room and sat down. Burgevine offered him a drink which he declined.

"This is not a social call, Mr. Burgevine," Albershot said. "I understand you played poker at the Running J regularly —with my old boss, Drew Harley, of the Lazy L, and the banker, LaProbe. Your luck the last few months ran out. Those men are carrying promises on your part to pay. Who'd think you had a secret vice, Burgevine?"

The man's smile came slowly. Albershot watched Burgevine's eyes and saw the danger signals in their depths. The man nodded. "Yes, I haven't been very lucky, sheriff. Is it within your jurisdiction to collect gambling debts?"

"No. But it is my duty to find a murderer, Burgevine," Albershot said, his hand close to his gun. "It looks to me as if Ben Sutro found one of those notes on Joel Yount. He came to see you about it and he did not get back alive."

"You are a stupid fellow, Albershot," Burgevine said. "You are jumping at conclusions. How many people in Sumner will back you up on such an outlandish charge? You must have more than that."

"I think I've got enough," Albershot said. "Think back, Burgevine—or whatever your name is—and see if you remember a Queenie Lachelle."

The man's control was something to see, the sheriff admitted. Just for a second did Burgevine betray the shock of the mention of the name.

"No," he said. "I've never met the lady."

"It's late," Albershot said. "I'm taking you into Sumner, Burgevine. We'll get there around midnight and the streets will be deserted. I'll spare you the indignity of parading you through a curious mob. When Sumner gets up in the morn-

ing you will be in jail." He drew his six-gun and got up and loosened the handcuffs from his belt. "I must make sure of you, Burgevine. Ben Sutro was careless and lost his irons. He was too sure of himself."

He saw a sudden gleam leap up in Burgevine's eyes. Here, in the dim light, the sheriff saw for the first time the evidence of derangement in the man.

"Thank you, sheriff," Burgevine said. "Just let me slip this dressing gown off and get into my coat. I assure you I have no weapon and if I had you have one pointing at me. You could not easily miss."

"Hurry up," Albershot said.

WHEN Burgevine had his sack coat on, Bill Albershot ordered the man to reach out for the handcuffs. He snapped them over the man's wrists and then smiled with satisfaction.

"Now I'll have that drink, Burgevine."

Albershot turned and picked up the bottle. Finding the cork was in tight, he bent over the table to look for the corkscrew. Suddenly he spun around and saw George Burgevine free of the cuffs and coming at him with a heavy cane. He fired quickly and Burgevine staggered backward to crash against the wall.

"Benette, King of Escapists!" Albershot said. "This is what I wanted to see. These are the same cuffs you beat Sutro's brains out with, Burgevine! I found them and wiped away the blood. Handcuffs look alike. You held up that stage, Mister, to pay back your gambling debts. Your bankroll ran out but you had to live like a gentleman. Like Carlisle Benette!"

Burgevine gasped out as he dug his fingers into a broken shoulder, "How, Albershot? How did you know these things?"

"Because a girl wanted a costume to wear to a dance," the sheriff ground out. "She got it from an old trunk in the storeroom of the hotel. A trunk that belonged to a Queenie Lachelle. She found clippings wrapped up in it. And a picture of you when you were in your prime, Benette! The clippings told me how Sutro was killed."

"Yes," Burgevine said and the madness all came from in back of his head and shone starkly in his eyes. "She ran away that night, with another man," he said. "I've been looking for her ever since. I've asked all those in the profession who came to Sumner if they knew of her. I thought she'd come back to the stage some day, for it was in her blood. I've watched and waited—for years. I

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made it possible for the best shows to come to Sumner for that reason, sheriff. I was going to kill her when I saw her again—if it took me fifty years. Damn her, but she never came back!"

"This time I'll use rope, Burgevine," Bill grinned. "I never was sold on those irons."

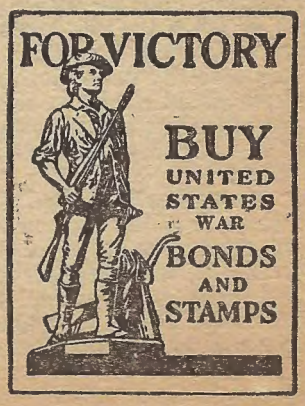
"Very well," the prisoner said. All the strength drained out of him and he seemed to shrink in his clothes. "I was never much of a hand getting out of ropes, Albershot. Be careful, for my shoulder pains very much. The money you are all looking for is in a chest in my room. Sutro was a clumsy man—he had nothing to go on but the paper I signed for Yount. But he intended to have my house ransacked while I was in jail. So I had to kill him, didn't I? You'll make a much better sheriff, Albershot."

Crazy, the sheriff told himself. Burgevine had cracked wide open. He drove the man out into the yard and there Burgevine called a Mexican name until a little man came out of the stable in his underwear, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

"Saddle a horse and help me into the saddle, Pablo," Albershot ordered.

Riding into Sumner, Burgevine said, "They'll hang me, Albershot. They'll build me a gallows. I'll give them a show, my friend. The great Benette will give the audience a show they will never forget. The final curtain, Albershot . . ."

Marlena looked very beautiful at the dance. The judges agreed that she had won the prize. Queenie Lachelle danced with Bill Albershot the night before Carlisle Benette gave his last performance. But it was Marlena Talbot and Bill Albershot who were married just a week after the hanging. The past had slipped back again after burying its dead.



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